

**GOSPEL OF HOPE FOR THE WORLD OF HOPELESS:
THE SUCCESS OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY
AND HOPE FOR THE TONGAN CHURCH**

**A Professional Project
presented to
the Faculty of
Claremont School of Theology**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry**

**by
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ABSTRACT

Gospel of Hope for the World of Hopeless: The Success of Early Christianity and Hope for the Tongan Church

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This project presents a ministry of hope and renewal for Christianity in Tonga and the Tongan churches in diaspora. Tongan traditional religion which formed Tongan culture and society still impacts Tongan Christianity. Traditional religious culture has a hierarchical structure which has influenced all segments of society and even Christian beliefs and practices. Immigrant churches have adopted the same hierarchical structure and added other social status, such as wealth and achievement, which create more physical and psychological barriers in the church community. These social issues add up to an unhealthy church, ministry, and Tongan community at large that causes divisions among families.

This project relies heavily on historical research to identify the ways in which Christianity as a fledgling religion was able to succeed against the great religions of the Greco-Roman world. Finally, the project concludes that Christianity brought a gospel of hope to the world full of hopelessness, especially to the masses in the Greco-Roman world. Christianity created a new community that served the needs of the destitute, generated a sense of belonging, welfare/health agency, and treated everyone inclusively with equality. These findings can provide guidance for a ministry that addresses the cultural hierarchy and traditional theological issues for a revitalized Christianity in both the Tongan and Immigrant Church.

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To my daughter, Grace-Kalivvyena, and the future generations of the Tongan UMC

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Problem Addressed by the Project

The problem addressed by this project is the undesirable impact on the Tongan Church, both in the native land and overseas, of the ancient Tongan culture based on theological understanding of gods, highly stratified culture, duty-bound worship and sacrificial giving leading to barriers to equality and inclusiveness and causing many people to impoverishment and leave the church and splinter into smaller factions.

Importance of the Problem

The problems addressed in this project developed out of my experiences in two different churches and contexts. First, my experiences as a member of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga (FWCT, also known as the Methodist Church in Tonga) before immigrating to the United States of America in the early 90's. Second, my experiences while a member for eighteen years and pastor of the United Methodist Church (UMC) for about two years. At the end of this project, the conclusions will apply to Tongan churches in these two contexts, especially the UMC.

In Tongan churches both home and abroad, the ancient Tongan cultural practices have created physical and psychological barriers in the church that make it difficult to proclaim equality and inclusiveness in the community of faith, and have caused the members of the lower socioeconomic class of the church to feel excluded at church. These cultural practices have had an unfavorable impact on Tongan Christianity for about two centuries.

Indigenous and foreign observers have criticized these Tongan traditional practices, especially *misinale* (annual giving to the church), *fakaafe/feilaulau* (feast and/or gift of money to the church/clergy), and *feinga pa'anga langa falelotu* (fundraising for church constructions) because of their competitive and obligated nature which tend to highlight social and economic inequalities and poverty for church members. However, within local congregations “protest is rarely confrontational but . . . discursive negation” perhaps of the social status of the leaders.¹ From experience, very few Tongan clergy believe these practices, *misinale* (annual giving to the church), *fakaafe/feilaulau* (feast and/or gift of money to the church/clergy), and *langa falelotu* (fundraising for church constructions), are the causes of the socioeconomic inequalities, poverty and faction, but perhaps could not go against this cultural current and status quo. Among those few Tongan clergy who spoke against these traditional practices are Senituli Koloi, Tevita Mohenoa Puloka, an alumnus of Claremont School of Theology and Principal of Sia'atoutai Theological School (owned by the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga), and Tavake Tupou, a former President of the Methodist Church of New Zealand. Koloi, the founder of the Tokaikolo Christian Fellowship that split from the Free Wesleyan Church (FWC) in 1978, claimed that FWC has led people astray through excessive and disproportionate emphasis on *misinale* and *fakaafe* over personal relationship with God. For Koloi, the Church in Tonga has been replaced God's grace as the means of salvation with works, especially sacrificial giving such as *misinale* and *fakaafe*. Recently, Puloka submitted a proposal to cease *misinale* (annual giving to the church) and church constructions for three years as a jubilee for members, their lands,

¹ Niko Besnier, *On the Edge of the Global: Modern Anxieties in a Pacific Island Nation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 209.

and farms.² Besides *misinale*, his proposal also included costly feasts prepared for the conference by members. Thousands of livestock, pigs, poultry, seafood, and crops, which were estimated to be millions of dollars' worth of food, were consumed in just a week of conference. Despite abundant food prepared during the church conference, and even on church occasions, members did not consider it as overabundance but as sacrificial giving. The more they give, the more blessings, both material and godly virtues, they would receive. These traditional feasts are degrading the economy and failing the healthiness of members and the country.

Yet another example: every year several members from different churches in Tonga go overseas, especially to the United State of America, Australia and New Zealand, to the immigrant churches to raise funds, especially for church constructions, such as chapels, church halls, and parsonages. An example of the devastating result of this competitive and sacrificial giving, especially in the immigrant church, is a Tongan congregation in Sydney, Australia, that built a multimillion-dollar church (chapel, hall and parsonage) to be paid for by few hundreds low income members. Now the bank has liquidated all the assets of the church including collateral properties to pay the mortgage of about twenty million dollars. And worst of all, this has left many members in despair and in deeper financial hardship.³ Unfortunately, the conference did not approve Puloka's proposal to cease *misinale* (annual giving to the church) and *feinga pa'anga*

² Bruce Hill, "Tongan Minister Wants Emphasis on Spirituality, Not Church Building: Problems for Pacific Island Christians," *ABC Radio Australia*, December 10, 2012, <http://www.taimionline.com/articles/6883> (accessed March 3, 2013).

³ Leesha Mckenny, "Tonga's Church, Built in Hope, Faith and Pride, Collapses in Debt," *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 28, 2012, <http://www.smh.com.au/national/tongas-church-built-in-hope-faith-and-pride-collapses-in-debt-20120127-1qlmv.html> (accessed November 12, 2013).

langa falelotu, church construction, or to do something about these kinds of giving and feasts.

Consequently, after many years of engaging in these sacrificial feasts and competitive giving, Tongans have become increasingly poor and it is even worse in the churches overseas. Cathy A. Small in her memoir, *Voyages: From Tongan Villages to American Suburbs*, notes this problem in the Tongan community in America. He possibly calculates it correctly that even though the Tongans have earned far more than they could make in Tonga, "it remains the case that 60 percent of Tongans in this country are within 200 percent of the poverty level, and more than 20 percent live below the poverty line, most without any public assistance."⁴ Similarly, Helen Morton Lee claims, in *Tongans Overseas*, that in a census report from the U. S. Department of Commerce in 1993, he finds that

Tongans were listed at the lowest end of the income scale for the Pacific Islanders, and both Tongans and Samoans had about half the national per capita income. Correlated to this, both groups had high poverty rates, with Tongans at 21.1 percent and Samoans 25.8 percent. Overall, approximately 21 percent of Pacific Islanders in the United States lived below the poverty level in 1989.⁵

These migrants who are struggling to make a living in this country constitute the adherents of the Tongan immigrant churches. From experience, it is a bit worse now than the past two decades because of the recent economic crises for some who used to own homes and lived in well-furnished apartments are currently living in motels with their families or staying with family/relative. Disappointingly, even young people who were born overseas also complained about church obligations planted in them by their parents

⁴ Cathy A. Small, *Voyages: From Tongan Villages to American Suburbs* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 191.

⁵ Helen Morton Lee, *Tongans Overseas: Between Two Shores* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 58.

from a very young age. As Lee states, “Another common criticism of churches is their role in placing obligations on people for commitments of time and money.”⁶ And when a person or a family is unable to give as expected to the church, or to actively participate, she/he feels unfaithful, unworthy, and unwelcome. The church and the community that they give up their lives to support and belong, now become an unwelcoming place, for they have lost their value and self-worth.

After two decades in the UMC, I have not seen any significant difference in the Tongan ministry or in ways to address the needs of our community, nor are there any programs to help members’ families, such as immigration consultation, adult education or English class, job training, and after-school programs for students. It seems to me that the church is not responsible for these irreligious programs. A Tongan pastor of the UMC, Matini N. Finau, in his doctoral project more than a decade ago in *Celebrating in Chaos*, states, this problem reflects

the failure of the church to minister to the whole person . . . the need for challenging the existing system, and to revitalize its mission towards society as a whole. The problem has further been aggravated by the church’s reluctance in the past to establish a welfare program at the local level, indicating ambivalence to the economic life of the church’s members.⁷

Yet, the church in Tonga is still cherishing their hierarchical culture, believing that God demands their all in supporting the church first, then their family, and not taking care of the social health and welfare of its members; and it is even worse in the Tongan churches overseas. Religion and worship, for Tongans, is fervently giving their time to attend church programs, talents to participate in ministry, and finances to support functions,

⁶ Lee, 161.

⁷ Matini Niponi Finau, “Celebrating in Chaos: Introducing a New Meaning of Death, Dying, and Mourning in the Pacific-Tongan Context” (DMin project, Claremont School of Theology, 1999), 51.

even fundraising from Tonga. Faithfulness in doing these things becomes the measure of adherents' spirituality, maturity, and pious membership. Tongan congregations do not participate in the community or ministry beyond the church's own walls. Some people are losing hope and are uninterested in church because most Tongan churches have failed to address the needs of their members and community.

Thesis

This project analyzes the rise of early Christianity and its success against Greco-Roman religions, focusing on what the early church actually did that directly contributed to its success, and applies these findings to revitalize the Tongan Church in the UMC California Pacific Annual Conference.

Definitions of Major Terms

Hope: The word hope is derived from the Greek word *elpis*, which is frequently associated with the Hebrew verbs meaning "to wait, expect" or "to be full of confidence, to trust."⁸ In *The Dictionary of the Bible*, Jeffrey S. Lamp says that the "biblical understanding of hope . . . contributes significantly to the worldview of biblical faith. Included are an expectation of the future, trust in attaining that future, patience while awaiting it, the desirability of the associated benefits, and confidence in the divine promises."⁹ In this context, I will define hope in the sense of a patient expectation of the future while trusting with confidence what God has promised.

⁸ Karl Paul Donfried, "Hope," in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 434.

⁹ Jeffery S. Lamp, "Hope," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 605.

Early Church: In this project, I will use early church to refer to the beginning of the church from the time of Jesus to the era of Constantine to focus mainly on Christians' efforts and ministry which contributed to their own success.

Tongan Church: The Wesleyan Church was the first church to be established by the British Methodist missionaries and is still the mother, dominant, and state church in Tonga. The Wesleyan Church was retitled later as, the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga (FWCT) and it is the primary object of reference.

Tongan Immigrant Church: Tongan Methodist Church overseas, especially Tongan UMC at California Pacific Annual Conference (Cal-Pac), which includes the churches in southern California and Hawaii.

Commoners: Ordinary people who are at the very bottom of the social order of Tongan society because they do not have direct relation to the kings and chiefs. In pre-Christianity, they were considered to have no souls, so their fate was uncertain and death was the end for them. The grave was their final destiny so there was no hope at all either in this life or the afterlife.

Kava Circle: The *kava* circle, called "*fai-kava*," (*fai/inu-kava* is drink in commoner's dialect) and '*ilo-kava* for the chief. *Kava* circle consists primarily of men who sit around the kava bowl, called "*kumete*," drinking kava and chatting. *Fai-kava* and '*ilo-kava* were derived from the royal *kava* ceremony, called "*taumafa-kava*" (*taumafa* is drink in kingly dialect) for it was originally a ceremony for the king. In *taumafa-kava*, chiefs and orators are sitting in circle in order of rank from the king. This hierarchical seating was traditionally seen as the gathering of the gods and a reflection of Tongan polity. Likewise, on Sunday before a service, it is a ceremony of welcoming the preacher

and the gospel in which the clergy is often seated in place of the king, topmost seat, if a chief is not attending, and the preacher is on next highest seat. Tongans commonly refer to that Sunday *kava* circle as “*kava ‘o e kosipeli*,” *kava* of the gospel. *Kava* is the traditional drink made of the crushed root of the pepper tree, or *kava* tree, mixing with cold water.

Work Previously Done in the Field

This study highlights several factors that led to the success of early Christianity over other religions in the Greco-Roman world: (1) A new community that served the needs of all people with love that generated a sense of belonging and inclusively invited every individual into egalitarian kinship; and (2) a new religion that worshiped a God who loved all people unconditionally, had elevated human and divine worth and status, had flexible degrees of devotion accessible for everyone, and had brought new hope for a better life both now, in this life, and the future, in the afterlife.

In his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, W. H. C. Frend asks the question: “How and why did Christianity become the religion of the Greco-Roman world?”¹⁰ Frend proposes two factors in the success of early Christianity. First, Christians proclaimed that Christianity fulfilled Jewish hopes. Second, Christians formed a closely interconnected and interrelated community. As Frend states, “The early history of Christianity unfolded amid the fervent hopes and expectations of the Jewish people. . . By 190 CE the Christians’ church was a closely organized and well-knit federation of communities extending from one end of the Mediterranean world to the other.”¹¹ Frend credits the

¹⁰ W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 3.

¹¹ Frend, 4.

success of the early church to Christianity's organization of a family type community where people were closely related to one another.

Corresponding to Frend's second factor for success, Rodney Stark in his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, also emphasizes that Christianity grew because "Christians constituted an intense community, able to generate the invincible obstinacy . . . that yielded immense religious rewards . . . and motivated efforts . . . to share the good news."¹² Additionally, he suggests three significant factors. First, Christians proclaimed and worshipped a God of love—a concept that was "entirely new" and different from Greco-Roman deities. Although Stark claims that the ultimate factor in the rise of Christianity was "the religion's particular doctrines that permitted Christianity to be among the most sweeping and successful revitalization movements in history," he emphasizes the significance of love, love of God to humanity and Christians to one another and beyond.¹³ Second, Christianity was a new religion in which women enjoyed a better social status than in any other religion or community in the Greco-Roman society. Stark claims, "Christianity was unusually appealing because within the Christian subculture women enjoyed far higher status than did women in the Greco-Roman world at large."¹⁴ Third, Christianity was inexpensive, or even free, to maintain in comparison to paganism. He states that "paganism was expensive to maintain, since it was embodied in elaborate temples, was served by professional priests, and depended on lavish festivals as the primary mode of participation."¹⁵ For Stark, Christianity succeeded because Christians proclaimed a God who loves all people, leading to the inclusion of the outcast,

¹² Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 208.

¹³ Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 211.

¹⁴ Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 95.

¹⁵ Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 198.

especially women and children. Christianity promoted an egalitarian and more accessible religion for all people, especially for the women and the poor.

PBS Frontline, which aired and publicized online a study entitled *From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians*,¹⁶ directly asked the same question that is at the center of project: “Why did Christianity succeed?” This program presented scholars discussing “the great appeal” that attracted many people in the world of antiquity to join this fledgling movement instead of their longtime traditional religions and rise up to change the ancient world.

These scholars say that Christianity succeeded because Christians created a new community that serves the physical and psychological needs of the poor and a new religion that serves the religious longings of hopeless masses of the Greco-Roman world.

For example, Helmut Koester suggests that one of the great appeals of Christianity was that Christians were creating a new community, which attracted the majority who had the lowest status of Greco-Roman society. Koester declares, “I think that only because at least certain parts of the early Christian mission were intent in creating new community, that only for that reason this movement was successful.”¹⁷ Besides a community that served people’s physical needs, this community also promised a future in this life and afterlife for individuals the oppressors of the Greco-Roman world could not touch. Koester states that Christians proclaimed that this new community “promised also immortality There is a future for the individual. And the message of the possibility for a human being to be related to something that is beyond the powers of

¹⁶ *Frontline*, “From Jesus to Christ, The First Christians: Why Did Christianity Succeed?” April 1998, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/> (accessed February 16, 2012).

¹⁷ Helmut Koester, interview, “From Jesus to Christ, The First Christians: The Great Appeal,” *Frontline*, April 1998, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/why/appeal.html> (accessed February 16, 2012).

this world was certainly one great attraction.”¹⁸ Furthermore, Koester also claims that the Christian community was also concerned with social welfare issues in serving its members. He states, “Christianity really established a realm of mutual social support for the members that joined the church . . . this was probably in the long run an enormously important factor for the success of the Christian mission.”¹⁹ Similarly, L. Michael White supports this view by saying that “the church becomes, in a lot of ways, a new kind of social welfare agency in the Roman Empire.”²⁰ For Koester and White, Christianity formed a community that served and supported the needs of the people and also promised a future life for all members. To put Koester’s claim succinctly, this is the gospel of hope that people were waiting for and so they converted to Christianity. For these people, there was no hope outside Christianity.

In addition to the significance of Christian community and hope, White also makes a substantial claim for the appeal of belonging to Christianity for immigrants. He claims that there was a “massive demographic change” in the second and third centuries that made Christians become “the leading citizens of some of the major cities.”²¹ So when new immigrants came, what

Christians offer probably as well as or better than anybody else in the Roman world is a sense of belonging. To be part of the Christian community . . . is to belong to a society of closely knit friends, brothers and sisters and Christ . . . it may be something as simple as that that spells the [basis] of the success of Christianity in the Roman world.²²

For White, Christian community was not only serving the people’s needs but they did this in a loving way that made people feel they belonged. In support of this argument, E. R.

¹⁸ Koester, interview, *Frontline*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ L. Michael White, interview, *Frontline*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Dodds in his work, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, states that “The Church provided the essentials of social security [for all people]. . . . But even more important, I suspect, than these material benefits was the sense of belonging which the Christian community could give.”²³ For White and Dodds, Christians generated a sense of belonging in their community, which was a key factor for immigrants to convert to Christianity.

Like other scholars who credited the success of Christianity to its distinctive community, E. Glenn Hinson in his 1995 book: *The Church Triumphant: A History of Christianity Up to 1300*, assertively states this view by saying that the “organized communities deserve the most credit for the spread of Christianity.”²⁴ Above all, Christians developed a new community of love and care for the people’s needs, which generated a sense of belonging that was distinctively different from other communities’ sense of belonging.

In addition to the success of the Christians’ distinctive community, Wayne A. Meeks adds that Christians proclaimed love in a very strange way. Similar to Stark’s first factor, God of love, Meeks states,

They [Christians] talk about a God who loves, a God who loves enough that he would send his very son into the world – never mind how odd the notion of God having a son was to the Jews . . . who calls upon people to exercise a similar kind of love, a love which manifested in this death, of the Son of God.²⁵

Meeks argues that this strange love-God who loves the world and is embodied in the sacrificial death of his son, which Christians are called to imitate and express to one

²³ E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 137.

²⁴ E. Glenn Hinson. *The Church Triumphant: A History of Christianity Up to 1300* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 44.

²⁵ Wayne A. Meeks, interview, *Frontline*.

another manifested in Christian community must have had a very powerful, emotional appeal to people who regarded Roman aristocrats and their gods as cruel. For Meek and Stark, this new and strange love of God and Christians attracted people who hoped to be loved by God and by their fellow citizens.

Despite supporting the idea that many people were drawn to Christianity because “the way that this community would take care of people . . . is an enormous element of the appeal of this movement,” Elaine H. Pagels leans to the human worth as more appealing. She proposes, “The Christian movement seemed to convey a sense of human worth”²⁶ In contrast to the gods of the ancient world, Pagels argues that Christianity taught that their God made both man and woman in God’s own likeness, and so everyone is unique and equal in God’s eyes. As Pagels maintains, “That’s an extraordinary message. And it would have been enormous news to many people who never saw their lives having value . . . that is a powerful appeal of this religion.”²⁷ Pagels also argues that the sense of human worth was conveyed in two ways: “Both by the story of Jesus and his simplicity and his humility in terms of social status, in terms of achievement, in terms of recognition during his lifetime. And also in the story of creation; it conveys royal status on every person”²⁸ For Pagels, the sense of human and divine worth was so appealing not only to the outcasts and marginalized masses but to all people knowing they had value to God.

Additionally, Christianity also developed flexible degrees of devotions, which were more inclusive and variable than other rival religions. Elizabeth Clark states that even though Christianity developed similar religious practitioners as did philosophical

²⁶ Elaine H. Pagels, interview, *Frontline*.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

sects and other groups, Christianity “allowed for different degrees of Christian devotion.”²⁹ Then she maintains, “So, Christianity could adjust itself to different types of people” from the highest class of intellectuals to the ordinary people.³⁰ Clark credits the success of the early church its adaptability of worship and devotion which inclusively catering to all people.

Beyond that, Gregory J. Riley in *The River of God: A New History of Christian Origins*, makes a strong statement that “Christianity succeeded because it gave every person, every single person without distinction at all, both a better way to live and a better way to die.”³¹ Riley credited the success of Christianity to the hopes of better life both in this world and in the afterlife that they promised and brought to all people.

Scope and Limitations of the Project

This project could be used overseas in New Zealand, Australia, or other Tongan denominations in the United States; however, it will be used primarily for the Tongan UMC in the California Pacific Annual Conference.

Though I will briefly discuss the socioeconomic and political situations in the Roman Empire that positively worked in favor of the success of Christianity, this project will focus on how and what the early church actually did, in words but predominantly in actions, that directly contributed to the success of early Christianity.

I will formulate seminars and trainings addressing the problem caused by indigenous religion and culture on the Tonga church aiming to create egalitarian church community—that serve the needs of its members, physically and spiritually, and foster

²⁹ Elizabeth Clark, interview, *Frontline*.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Gregory J. Riley, *The River of God: A New History of Christian Origins* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 180.

sense belonging, and to design new ways of *misinale*—that generate wealth and health in the church community and beyond. These practices and trainings are intended for use in weekends for a month in the summer—for heath tests and trainings, and in the winter—education and license for contractor.

Procedure for Integration

This project will draw primarily from the field of Church History, especially early church history up to the era of Constantine, and also the field of New Testament and Christian Origins. I am focusing in this era specifically to concentrate on the “how” and the “what” of the fledgling Jesus movement’s rise to become the state religion in Constantine’s kingdom. These two questions will be answered through the historical study of the early church. Furthermore, I am interested in how and what Christianity did that became the gospel or message of hope that had inspired the early Christians to succeed in a hostile environment. Therefore, the method to be used in this project will be a library research on the history of the early church started from the Jesus movement in the first century through Constantine’s reign in the fourth century. I hope that from this research and project, the Tongan immigrant UMC and the FWCT in Tonga may learn from the success of the early church against the culture and religions of the Greco-Roman world. As a result, I will offer a set of proposals about a new church community, and a new way of doing *misinale* (annual giving to the church) for the Tongan immigrant UMC.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter one will include the problem addressed by this project and the important of the problem, thesis, definitions of terms, works previously done in the field, and the methodology used for this project.

Chapter 2: Indigenous Tongan Religion and Culture

This chapter will outline the problem with some background information detailing how the Tongan culture based on their theological understandings of gods has created hierarchical culture and obligatory worship and giving in the Tongan Church and the Tongan immigrant UMC. It will address the need to revitalize the ministry of the Tongan immigrant congregations in the UMC and articulate the goals of the project.

Chapter 3: Hopelessness in the Greco-Roman World and the Rise of Christianity

In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the socioeconomic and political conditions in the Greco-Roman world where Christianity had developed. This chapter will survey the beginning of the early church in the first century up to the time of Constantine in the early fourth century with an intention to analyze the aspects that contributed to the success of this infant movement.

Chapter 4: Gospel of Hope and the Success of Christianity

Chapter three will discuss scholars' arguments and reasons for the success of Christianity and what was so appealing to the masses in the Roman Empire who converted to Christianity. I will address significant contributions from scholars in two subsections, borrowing a phrase from Riley that "Christianity succeeded because it gave

every person, every single person without distinction at all, both a better way to live and a better way to die.”³²

Chapter 5: Vital Ministry for the Tongan Church

In chapter four, I will introduce a vital understanding of the Christian culture that is more relevant to the Tongan immigrant churches in the 21st century. It will focus on a community of love that promotes an egalitarian culture, and a new way of doing *misinale* (annual giving to the church) that is cheerful, and noncompetitive which could revitalize the mission and ministry of the Tongan immigrant congregations in the UMC at California Pacific Annual Conference.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The conclusion will review the gospel or message of hope as the key to the rise and success of the early church. It will highlight the findings of this project and offer suggestions on how the gospel of hope, as discussed in this project, will be vital for the ministry of the Tongan immigrant churches.

³² Riley, *River of God*, 180.

CHAPTER 2

Indigenous Tongan Religion and Culture

The indigenous Tongans were polytheists and believed in a hierarchy of gods who ruled according to their power and functions. Sarah S. Farmer states, “There was an order of created gods of different ranks . . . these [gods] were related to each other, father, son, and nephew; or as others say, father, son, and grandson.”¹ The community of these gods was exclusive for them only and not for any unrelated gods or human beings. These gods included: (1) *Tangaloas (Kau Tangaloa)*² – the highest and most divine god who lived in the solid firmament, called *langi* (sky), with his children; (2) *Hikule ‘o* – the god of the harvest who resided in the underworld, called *Pulotu* (Paradise),³ to guard the spirits of the kings and chiefs. Only the kings and chiefs had souls because they were descendants of *Tangaloa*.⁴ The commoners were hopeless, no hope at all, neither in this-worldly life nor in the afterlife. Their graves were the commoners’ final destiny; (3) *Maui (Kau Maui)*⁵ – the gods who lived on earth and were engaged in humans’ lives and activities; and (4) the family cultic gods, such as sea creatures and stones. For instance, when Christianity arrived in Tonga in the early 19th century, *Taufa ‘ahau*, who later became the king, converted to Christianity, and united the island kingdom, still adored a white shark,

¹ Sarah S. Farmer, *Tonga and the Friendly Islands: With a Sketch of Their Mission History* (London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1855), 126.

² *Tangaloa* is the main god’s name but “s” indicates plural; and “kau” indicates plural in Tongan language because there were many gods, possibly five, who carried *Tangaloa* as first name; and their second names (*‘Eitumatupu ‘a*, *‘Utulongolongo*, *Tufunga*, etc.) indicate their specific functions. For example, *Tangaloa Tufunga*, (*Tufunga* means carpenter or artisan).

³ *Pulotu* is the underworld, the abode of the dead, or paradise. It was believed to be under the ground and the entrance was under a clump of reeds or under a big stone. Others believed that it was beyond the ocean and reserved only for the chiefs for the commoners ended their life at death.

⁴ Indigenous Tongans believed that their first king, *‘Aho ‘eitu*, was the only humanly son of the superior god, *Tangaloa ‘Eitumatu ‘a*, and the chiefs were *‘Aho ‘eitu*’s half-brothers who were punished by their father to come down from *langi*, sky, to serve the king, their youngest brother.

⁵ *Maui* were human beings of extraordinary size and strength. *Kau* is a collective word; see note on *Tangaloa*.

Taufatahi, as his cultic god.⁶ Each god had at least one priest/priestess who claimed to have great power so he/she had a high status in the family and society because of their functions and relations to the chiefs. As a Tongan church historian, Sione Latukefu in *Church and State in Tonga*, states that “the priests were chosen and inspired by a particular god, and they mainly came from the chieftain class.”⁷ Some gods did not have priests or priestess but the chiefs were their priestly representatives. Tongan ancient religion was a chiefly domain for the principal gods and their priests were related primarily to the king/chiefs. The priests’ and priestesses’ primary duty was as mediators between gods and worshippers through sacrificial offerings and gifts intended for the perpetuation of the chiefs’ power and interests. However, the priests and priestesses were sometimes rude and demanding for more gifts for the sacrificial rituals, especially for commoners and poor people which could not afford. Farmer states that sometimes a priest would indecently ask, “Do you think that I am going to take any notice of such paltry things as you have brought?”⁸ The ancient Tongan religion was obligatory, expensive, and occasionally time-consuming. Consequently, the poor people would decline to bring more costly gifts; however, sometimes they would seek lower gods which were more affordable. When these lower and secondary gods were pleased, they appealed to the higher and more respected deities in *Pulotu* to provide the adherent’s request. Consequently, the worshippers considered their relationship with their gods not

⁶ *Taufa’ahau* sailed to one of the islands, in *Ha’apai* Group, and he ordered his crews to throw *Pita Vi*, the first Tongan preacher in the *Ha’apai* Group to *Taufatahi* to test the new religion (Christianity). If *Taufatahi* devoured him then the new religion is untrue. The shark didn’t bite *Pita Vi* and he swam to the nearby island, *Ha’ano*, where the king landed and had his royal kava circle. *Pita* came ashore and grabbed a *fue* (creeper that grows near the seashore) put around his waist, as a *ta’ovala*—expressed his respect, sat at the kava circle and greeted the king, “Your majesty it has been done” (translation mine).

⁷ Sione Latukefu, *Church and State in Tonga: The Wesleyan Methodist Missionaries and Political Development, 1822-1875* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1974), 32.

⁸ Farmer, 128.

in terms of reverence but of fear of gods' wrath and obligation. As Farmer declares, "For these spirit-gods, the Tonguese [Tongans] did not entertain sentiments of love, or of true reverence. The name by which they called them expressed a mixed emotion of fear and contempt. It answers nearly our term hobgoblin."⁹ For the ancient Tongans, sacrifice or worship was sometimes too demanding and unaffordable for poor worshippers, common people, which led them to be indebted because of fear. Thomas West, one of the early Methodist missionaries to Tonga, sums up the Tongan religions as the missionaries first comprehended it.

The religion of the Tongans incorporated no abstract principles of belief. It is rather a system of despotism, in which deities, ceremonies, and restrictions, had been indefinitely multiplied, till it presented a chaos of dark superstition, into which the population plunged headlong through slavish fear and ignorance. . . . No spirit of benevolence pervaded the system. It abounded in punishments for the present life and in dark threatenings for the future. Bulotu [Pulotu] the Tongan Paradise, was reserved only for the spirits of the departed chiefs and persons of rank Of the fate of the tu'a (commoner) there was no certainty. . . . Savage rites, and deities who delighted in mischief and blood; a cruel and rapacious priesthood; a despotic and oppressive government; inhuman faiths and absurd superstitions – under these people were held in abject bondage.¹⁰

Indigenous Tongan religion served to legitimate the social order and the authority of the king/chiefs over commoners, to foster deference and generate the requirements for offering rituals, such as *'inasi* (offering of the first-fruits), sacrifices and festivals. This old religion and its required rituals were designed to accumulate the power and wealth of the king and his chiefs.

Because the gods were stratified, every niche of Tongan society and the Church is also structured hierarchically: (1) *tu 'i* – the king is on top of the social structure because

⁹ Farmer, 129.

¹⁰ Thomas West, *Ten Years in South-Central Polynesia: Being Reminiscences of a Personal Mission to the Friendly Islands and the Dependencies* (London: James Nisbet, 1865), 255-56.

he is a direct descendant of the superior god, *Tangaloa 'Eitumatupu 'a*, and mortal representative of the gods. The king is both the temporal and spiritual leader of the people; (2) *hou 'eiki* – next are the chiefs because they are families and relatives of the king(s). Originally, they were brothers of the first king of Tonga, *'Aho 'eitu*, the son of the superior god, *Tangaloa 'Eitumatupu 'a*; (3) *kakai* – then commoners are ordinary people who have no relationship to the king. Sometimes they are derisively called *kainanga 'o e fonua* or eaters of the land/earth, or *ha 'a me 'avale* or clan of the stupid things; and (4) *popula* – finally the slaves are commoners who lose their social rights. However, this class, *popula*, is not often counted in the social order. The village is organized in the same way, divided into chiefs (*hou 'eiki*), chiefs' orators (*matāpule*), and commoners. The extended family is ordered similarly with the *'ulumotu 'a* (patriarch) – the oldest male in the father's ancestry and so the head of the clan and the orator and decision-maker of the tribe; the *fahu*¹¹ (matriarch) – the one who has the greatest liberties and most belongings, the *liongi* – the lowest in the clan, especially at funeral, those who are inferior to the deceased. The immediate family is also formed hierarchically, the *tamai*, father, is the head of the family, and then the *fā 'ē*, mother, and then the *fānau*, children. By this I conclude that Tonga is the most stratified society in the Pacific region.

The structure of Tongan society is quite fixed because it is heredity, which makes it almost impossible for commoners to make their way up the social ladder. Niko Besnier, in his recent work *On the Edge of the Global*, states precisely that Tongan social structure is “a society whose rigid stratification otherwise affords limited opportunities for upward

¹¹ The *fahu* is the father's oldest sister to his children. In Tongan custom one's *fahu* may take great liberties with one's belongings because she has the highest rank of honor in Tongan family's circle.

mobility.”¹² These limited opportunities are through higher education from overseas (because there is none in Tonga) and/or appointed by the king as his cabinet minister; and by marriage to a high-ranking chief, but only the wife and her children, especially the eldest son rank with chief. However, the scarcity of resources and education maintain the status quo of the society. The king and chiefs hold positions as higher governmental officials with few highly educated commoners. For instance, the rightful heir to the king and nobles are inherited; the Prime Minister is predominantly a noble; 33 nobles (high-ranking chiefs) who are estate holders and so head of village community; and nine of the nobles are taking terms to be members of the 26 parliament representatives.¹³ Thus, leadership is inherited and not learned, and leaders belong to the royal family and predominantly nobles/chiefs. People are hoping for a window of opportunity to migrate overseas to study or work in order to have a better living. To illustrate the scarcity of resources, education, and opportunities, Small writes, “The fact that the Mormon Church facilitated the migration of Tongans to the United States was one of the major reasons why Mormonism was the fastest growing religion in Tonga during the 1960s.”¹⁴ People were starving for opportunities overseas to have a higher standard of living and liberation from hierarchical social limitations.

The Tongan Church has also unfortunately adopted this social structure. For instance, Tongan language was also developed to address these hierarchical ranks, the king, chiefs and commoners, so three different dialects are used. When Christianity

¹² Besnier, 207.

¹³ The increase of people’s representative to the parliament, from 9 to 17, was part of the people’s political push for a democratic reform. Before, the nobles had 9 parliament representatives besides they were also appointed by the king to most ministers’ position, so they dominated the house and government leadership.

¹⁴ Small, 51.

succeeded and translated the Bible into Tongan, with the help of native Christians, the dialects for the king and chief were applied to God and Jesus, and very rarely used the commoners' language for Jesus instead. For instance, the title Lord, either designated to God/Jesus, is translated as *'Eiki*, which is also a Tongan word for chief. Moreover, the structure of the Church leadership as commonly addressed during worship service is as follows: the king, the chiefs, the bishop, the general secretary, the clergy, the lay leadership, and members. This stratification is also reflected in the Tongan Church seating.¹⁵ For example, in the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga (FWCT), where the royal family, chiefs, government officials and church leaders attend, the king is on the highest stage on the right hand of the pulpit, the chiefs are next and below the king, the international diplomats and government officials are opposite the king/chiefs (on the front left of the pulpit), and the choir and people are on the main floor facing the pulpit. A. Harold Wood notes that *Taufa 'ahau* was displeased that the pulpit was higher than his seat so he ordered to elevate his seat to be higher than the preacher.¹⁶ Before preachers preach, they must address their sincere reverence to the authorities following the society's social order and the church.¹⁷ Most Tongans refer to that address of reverence (*fakatapu*) as a *ngofua ke lea pe malanga* (a permission to speak or preach).

¹⁵ The royal *kava* ceremony is arranged in order of rank possibly a constant reminder to the chiefs and orators where one comes in the order of prestige. Accordingly, the chiefs *kava* ceremony adopted that hierarchical arrangement and even with the church in the *kava 'o e kosipeli* ceremony (kava of the preacher of the gospel).

¹⁶ A. Harold Wood, *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church*, vol. 1, *Tonga and Samoa* (Melbourne: Aldersgate Press, 1975), 51-52.

¹⁷ The traditional and very formal address of reverence usually follow the *ha'a*, clan, especially in the royal *kava* ceremony.

The king has a significant role in the FWCT conference and election.¹⁸ The Constitution and Rules of the church, since the reunion of 1924, still have the article which directed that the first president of the church was to be appointed by Queen *Salote Tupou III*. It is also stated that the first President of the Conference shall be appointed by Her Majesty from among the ordained ministers in an appointment. Since that time, it is still the practice every year, according to this article, for the Conference to seek the approval of the monarch after they have elected the President. During the official opening of the Church's conference, the president (bishop) kneel before the king to put his presidential (episcopal) robe—possibly a symbol of the king's approval and appointment. Moreover, the president is often the royal chaplain and the FWCT is the state religion. The state has influenced the life of the church and there is no clear separation between church and state. The kings of Tongan had a history of direct involvement in the Church. For instance, in 1830 when, the king, Tupou I converted to Christianity, he ordered all his subjects to convert to his new religion or face punishment, exile, and persecution. When the Church split in 1855, Tupou III tried to reunify them in 1924 under the current name Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga (FWCT). However, the Church split again and formed Church of Tonga (also known as the Church of the Chiefs). As observed by Wood-Ellem, "With the direct involvement of the Queen the FWC [Free Wesleyan Church] became a strong supporter of the traditional hierarchy of Tongan society."¹⁹ By this, the church has become a hierarchical institution leading to inequality and schism, even with the Tongan immigrant churches.

¹⁸ The church here refers to the Methodist Church in Tonga, The Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. It was the first established church and now is the state church.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Wood-Ellem, *Queen Salote of Tonga: The Story of an Era, 1900-1965* (Auckland, NZ: Auckland University Press, 1999), 121.

Unfortunately, most of the Tongan congregations overseas, including the Tongan UMC, have also adopted and are practicing this social hierarchy. Like the social status of ancient Tonga priests and priestess, Christian ministers or clergy have that respect and status at church and in the society. Lee states, "Some ministers feel uncomfortable with the high status they are accorded. Another minister, also a long-term resident of Australia, said Tongans often spoke to him in the same respectful language used for the nobles in Tonga."²⁰ Even though the Tongan immigrant churches have no royal family or chiefs (nobles) as members, they elect a church member or find the closest one in blood relation to the king or chiefs to represent the chief and sit in front of the church. They also elect a *matāpule*, or spokesman to speak for the elected chief, or clergy (representing the church) during kava circle in welcoming the Sunday preacher, and for the church in other customary activities. Sometimes, the election of a church's chief and spokesman causes quarrels, divisions, and even splits in the church. Lee declares,

The notion of Tongan 'community,' which helps to create a sense of solidarity among migrants, does not prevent numerous tensions arising within and between migrant populations. Churches, as we have seen, are one source of such tensions, particularly with regard to the splitting of congregations into smaller groups and disagreements over how 'traditional' the church practices should be.²¹

Because of the absence of the traditional social status, especially king and chiefs/nobles, in the immigrant Tongan churches, wealth and achievement emerge as new social status among the commoners. This new social order becomes one of the main causes of problems in the immigrant churches. As Lee states, "The quest for socioeconomic success can in itself cause rivalry as families vie for recognition for their achievements in

²⁰ Lee, 44.

²¹ Lee, 46.

the new country.”²² Other social issues that create tension over status are often expressed in the distinctions made between birthplace and residence. This is also true in the Tongan community overseas. To illustrate, Tongans in America accord their community higher status than those in Australia, as Australia regards New Zealand. As Lee affirms, “These distinctions are then relayed into tensions between settlers in the different nations. All of these tensions make it difficult to sustain a sense of community. They also can be confusing for young people struggling with identity issues and desiring a sense of belonging.”²³ These social orders, traditional and new, were almost always addressed in every Tongan gathering, even at churches. In the Tongan worship services and all other church and community gatherings, preachers/speakers have to begin their speeches by addressing their reverence in hierarchical order, including God and then God’s presence in the sanctuary, the elected chief and spokesman, clergy, church leaders, and finally all the members. They often conclude with an affirming statement of hierarchy: “From the highest to the lowest.” As a result, hierarchy has been consistently reaffirmed in all Tongan gatherings, though the sense of community and belonging is difficult to sustain for many people, especially overseas-born young Tongans. Many Tongan immigrant churches have struggled with these hierarchies; especially new orders such as the election of chiefs, wealth and achievements, cause a split-off from church, even within families.

Another influence of the early Tongan religion in the Tongan Church is that worshipping and sacrificial giving to God, king/chiefs is an obligation leading to competing for prestige and virtue and causing many adherents to face economic hardship. In one of the Tongan Methodist (FWCT) teaching materials for confirmands called *Ko*

²² Lee, 46.

²³ Lee, 48.

Hono Ua 'o e Fehu'i mo e Tali, The Second of Question and Answer, stated in the very first line that *Ko e Lotu ko hotau fatongia totonu ki he 'Otua* (worship is our rightful duty to God).²⁴ This notion was developed from the commoners' obligations to gods, the king, and the chiefs. In Tongan tradition, the first king of Tonga, 'Aho'eitu, was a son of Tangaloa 'Eitumatupu'a and a beautiful mortal woman named Va'epopua. Therefore, 'Aho'eitu's kingly line called the *Ha'a Tu'i Tonga* was believed to be sacred and the commoners' responsibility was to serve the king.²⁵ Thus, commoners have to sacrifice to the gods, present offerings of the first-fruits of their labors, called 'inasi, and even sacrifice their own lives to the king and the chiefs.

For instance, the 'inasi, which literally means share or portion, was a tribute in honor of the *Tu'i Tonga*, the mortal representative of *Hikule'o*, the god of the harvest, or the high priest of the god who represented him by which everyone in the country was affected.²⁶ The 'inasi (offering of the first-fruits) was presented, by every *ha'a* (clan) or subjects (estates of the king), their offerings displayed one by one in front of the king, attendants, high priest, and others. Then one of the attendants commented on their offerings, affirmed the king's approval and their duties as commoners. To please the gods/king, commoners had to present the best first-fruits of their harvests, largest pigs, and in greatest quantity. William Mariner and the early London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries noted that during the 'inasi ceremony the food was greatly wasted and not eaten but the chiefs were boasted of their power in aggressive shows of conspicuous consumption of food. The quantity and waste of food was a symbol of

²⁴ *Ko Hono Ua 'o e Fehu'i mo e Tali*, [The Second of Question and Answer] (Nuku'alofa, Tonga: Taulua Press, 1996), 25: "*Ko e Lotu ko hotau fatongia totonu ki he 'Otua*" (translation mine).

²⁵ Wood-Ellem, 18.

²⁶ Latukefu, 3-4.

power, greatness, and wealth of the king and loyalty of the commoners.²⁷ The 'inasi ceremony was performed as an act of worship to the king. However, if the king's office was vacant, the traditional royal clothes were placed on the king's chair and the people bowed down before the dress. Mariner wrote that it was a ceremony which affected the property of every individual. The ceremony was not only to honor the gods represented by the *Tu'i Tonga* but also to seek their protection over the whole country, especially the yield of the land.²⁸ Failure to observe the 'inasi (offering of the first-fruits) would bring down the wrath of the gods and could lead to the death of the chiefs and their subjects.

The LMS missionaries noted the supremacy of the chiefs in the ceremonies:

... each of which deities are on certain occasions represented by the several chiefs of those districts; so that we find their natches ['inasi]²⁹ and other annual exhibitions are not mere public amusements, but religious observances, whereon they think the lives and health of their chiefs, for whom they have great affection, entirely depend; as likewise the prosperity of the country in general.³⁰

The chiefs believed that proper ceremony of 'inasi (offering of the first-fruits) to the gods was very significant to their health, the fortune of all people, and the productivity of the land. Therefore, the chiefs did whatever it took to please the gods by/through serving the sacred king, *Tu'i Tonga*. David Samwell wrote that they were told that the chiefs would pay homage to the *Tu'i Tonga* by killing some of their dependents and there would be about fifty human sacrifices at the annual 'inasi (offering of the first-fruits) ceremony.³¹ . Because commoners had no souls, eaters of the land/earth, and stupid things, there was

²⁷ John Martin, *Tonga Islands: William Mariner's Account*, 5th ed. (Nuku'alofa, Tonga: Vava'u Press, 1991), 248, 96.

²⁸ Martin, 342.

²⁹ All Tongan words and names are misspelled by missionaries and officers, and language used in this work was in old English (British) language.

³⁰ William Wilson and James Wilson, *A Missionary Voyage to the Southern Pacific Ocean* (London: Printed by S. Gosnell for T. Chapman, 1799), 277.

³¹ James Cook, *The Voyage of the Resolution and the Discovery, 1776-1780*, vol. 3, ed. J. C. Beaglehole (Cambridge: Published for the Hakluyt Society at the University Press, 1967), 917.

nothing required of them but to serve the gods, the king and the chiefs. Farmer states this belief that one of the chiefs spoke of the commoners as “low, common people, who eat earth or insects and thought that they ran no risk if they killed them when it suited their purpose.”³² The people had no other option but to participate because failing to do so could only indicate sedition, the worst offence of all, which could lead to their deaths. Each had to bring the best because what was brought was publicly displayed. It was sacrilegious to hold back any part that was intended for the *‘inasi* (offering of the first-fruits). The ‘gods’ were the focus but there were no other ‘gods’ but the *Tu‘i Tonga* and the chiefs. Tongan traditional religion was inseparable with services to the king/chiefs.

Another ceremony that was observed in honor of the god and kings was *no ‘okia* (strangling). It was a symbol of love and reverence of the wives to the king or chief. In *Religious and Cosmic Belief of Central Polynesia*, Robert Williamson quoted George Veason, an early 19th century missionary, that

The strangling was done on the death of Mumui [in 1797], the former *Tu‘i Ha‘atakalaua*, saying that two of his wives were strangled, . . . Morenhout [speaking of Tonga] says that on the death of a chief his wives were strangled on his tomb; Pere, A.C. says that when a king was interred, they were often buried alive, in the same grave, his daughters, and his wife.³³

Another example of Tongan commoners’ ceremony as an act of sacrifice to the gods or reverence to the chief is called *tutu ‘u-nima* – the amputation of a finger. It was an act of sacrifice in hope of pleasing the gods to ensure healing, and as an act of reverence it was an obligation of the commoners to the king/chiefs. Paul W. Dale writes that an English sailor named William Mariner described this ceremony as an act of honor.

³² Farmer, 131.

³³ Robert Williamson, *Religious and Cosmic Beliefs of Central Polynesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 248.

I witnessed more than one little child quarrelling for the honor of having it done. The finger is laid flat upon a block of wood. A knife, axe, or sharp stone is placed with the edge upon the line of proposed separation; from the nature of the action, the wound seldom bleeds much. The stump is then held in the smoke and steam arising from the combustion of fresh plucked grass stops any flow of blood.³⁴

For the commoners, sacrifice to the gods and paying respect to the king/chiefs was an obligation and an honor. This sacrificial ceremony is common for children since they were the most inferior in the family. E. E. V. Collocott also quoted Mariner: "I am told that among an earlier generation of Tongans it was comparatively rare to find anyone who lived a long life with both [all] fingers intact."³⁵ Commoners were sacrificing their bodies and lives to please gods and the king/chiefs for they believed that it was their rightful duty, sacred requirement and virtue since they didn't have the privilege of afterlife at *Pulotu*.

Additionally, the extreme of this kind of sacrifice and reverence was related in two epic stories. A sacred king, *Ha'a Tu'i Tonga*, was found with only the upper half of his body amputated. Before the king's burial one of his subjects volunteered to have the lower half of his own body amputated and attached to the king's so that he could be buried whole. The other is the most told and admired story of a leper named *Kava*. Because of her leprosy, *Kava*'s parents lived on a deserted small island, *'Eu'eiki*, by themselves. One day *Kava*'s parents heard the king, the *Tu'i Tonga*, and his fishermen land on the island to find food. *Kava*'s parents ran to their plantation to get their best and biggest root crop, *kape*, but the king declined and rested on it. They had nothing else worth giving to the *Tu'i Tonga*, but their only daughter, *Kava*. Therefore, they killed her

³⁴ Paul W. Dale, *The Tongan Book* (London: Minerva Press, 1983), 355.

³⁵ E. E. V. Collocott, "Notes on Tongan Religion," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 30, no. 3 (September 1921): 158.

and when the king heard of it he commanded his fishermen to leave the island. The parents buried *Kava* and a few weeks later two plants grew up on her grave. The bitter tasting one was named *kava* (fiber tree), and the sweet one *tō*, sugar cane. *Lo'au* instructed Kava's parents to take the plants to the king.³⁶ The kava became the traditional drink and the formation of the Tongan culture and custom.³⁷ Even to this day, kava is used in the customary ritual of the appointment of king and chief. Bott makes an interesting statement which connects this cultural practice to a Christian sacrament. She says, "The drinking of *kava* is thus a communion. It commemorates not only the sacrifice of the people for their king, but also the sympathy and appreciation of the king for his people."³⁸ The Tongan Church later adopted this kava ceremony for church purposes, such as welcoming of preachers, symbolizing covenantal oath for wedding couples, and signifying sympathy in funerals for the family of the deceased. *Kava* is far more than a drink for it is a cultural mode of maintaining order and one's social identity.

Another impact of '*inasi* (offering of the first-fruits) on Christianity is plainly evident in the Tongans' understanding that the fruits of their labors are given to church, or for church purposes as *fakaafe* (banquet) or *feilaulau* (sacrifice), sacrificial feast. Also they often say that *fua kavenga* (bearing the burden) or accomplishing these sacrificial giving to the church is *ko e fatongia totonu pe ke fai* (a rightful duty to do). Tongans understand *misinale* (annual giving to the church) and *fakaafe/feilaulau* (feast and/or gift of money to the church/clergy) in this traditional way. This belief is reflected in the church's annual fundraising, called *misinale* (missionary), which is like '*inasi* (offering

³⁶ Lo'au is probably a mythical figure who was believed to be the founder of Tongan customs and regulator of social life.

³⁷ Elizabeth Bott, *Tongan Society at the Time of Captain Cook's Visits: Discussions with Her Majesty Queen Salote Tupou III* (Wellington: Polynesian Society, 1982), 93.

³⁸ Bott, 93.

of first-fruits) and sacrifice.³⁹ Like the presentation of *'inasi* (offering of the first-fruits), *misinale* (annual giving to the church) obligates the congregants to give more than their financial potential. Besnier indicates that the church in Tonga used the congregants' competitive gift giving rituals, such as the Wesleyan *misinale*, primarily for church buildings and pastors' financial support. He claims,

Mainstream churches are the recipient of substantial wealth from their congregants in the form of cash, food, *koloa faka-Tonga* [Tongan valuables], and *tokonaki* [raw food]. Church adherents present this wealth to church hierarchies during competitive gift giving rituals, such as the Wesleyan *misinale* Churches use this wealth to build more church buildings, maintain existing ones, and keep the pastor and his family living in the style to which they are accustomed. In *anga faka-Tonga* [Tongan way], 'bearing the burden' (*fua kavenga*) is a virtue, and one gives to the church to display one's 'ofa, 'empathy, compassion, generosity,' and to compete for prestige, even if it brings the family to the brink of bankruptcy. Giving to the church is part of a wider system of reciprocity . . . and more importantly, church personnel ensure their parishioners' divine providence and protection.⁴⁰

Besnier makes a noteworthy observation of the cultural dimensions that continues to influence practices in the church today. For the Tongan, sacrificial giving to God through the church, such as *misinale*, is a virtue and a sign of reverence.⁴¹ Besnier claims that Mormonism attempted to resolve this problem by promoting fixed tithing in Tonga, and that was another factor for the fast growth of the church in the island. He notes that "Tithing to the Church (*vahe hongofulu*) fixed, at 10 percent, has liberated its members, economically and morally, from the sometimes enormously burdensome obligations that

³⁹ *Misinale* is a transliteration of the word missionary coined by the Methodist missionary in the early 19th century to apply to the church annual fundraising for the purpose of supporting the missionary or the church's missions in the South Pacific administered from Australia.

⁴⁰ Besnier, 209.

⁴¹ In the FWCT hymnal, Rev. James Egan Moulton, one of the early missionary, founder and principal of Tupou College, praised the Tongans for their habitually giving as they were from the *ha'a tu'i Sapa* (tribe of the king of Saba; mine translation). Moulton also wrote that some of the early missionaries, particularly Thomas West, were impressed at the resemblances of many of the Tongan features, customs, and practices to the Hebrew people. When West translated the Tongan Bible from Hebrew, he was more convinced of these racial resemblances.

non-Mormons define as part and parcel of Tongan identity. Connection It has attracted to the Church adherents of other denominations dissatisfied with the latter's expectations."⁴² This is a significant assessment of the appeal of fixed giving to the Tongan Christians. However, the privacy of giving is an even more appealing factor in tithing, especially for the poor. This is crucial for the Tongan immigrant churches because such privacy of giving eliminates another barrier that is based on achievement and wealth.

⁴² Besnier, 212.

CHAPTER 3

Hopelessness in the Greco-Roman World and the Rise of Christianity

Society and Culture

The masses of the Greco-Roman world lived hopelessly because of political tyrannies, war, famine, diseases, and unequal sharing of wealth and power. For instance, the famine in 48 A.D. and the revolt in 66 A.D. worsened the economy and public health. The Christian movement began during this socio-economic and socio-political turmoil, the autocracy of the Roman Empire, and the great religions of the Greco-Roman world.¹

In the first century, Christianity emerged under the religious influence of Judaism in the time of Greek civilization that was subjected to the political dominance of Rome. Marcus J. Borg states it precisely when he writes, "By the first century, two social worlds were in collision: the social world of Judaism and the social world composed of Hellenistic culture and Roman political power. The annexation of Palestine by Rome in 63 B.C. generated both political conflict and severe economic pressure."² As a result of being oppressed for many years, of having diseases and no public health services, of losing their properties and loved ones, and living in anxiety with no hope in this life whatsoever, most people were extremely poor and vulnerable. Helmut Koester states that,

in spite of the glories of Roman Empire, people lived in a world in which there was inequality, there was great poverty on the one hand and immense wealth in the hands of a very few people. There were sickness

¹ The ordinary itinerant Jews who started this movement emerged from a long history of captivity and exile for centuries. They were oppressed and mistreated by different governments such as those from Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and then Rome for about eight hundred years. They were civilized and re-civilized with the cultures and religion of those regimes. The masses were raised in a melting-pot society with polytheistic gods and religions, a society which Riley refers to as *The River of God* when addressing a similar issue.

² Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 83.

and disease and there were no public health services, and doctors were expensive.³

Because of this, the masses of the empire hopelessly accepted death as philosophers taught about their human fate. In support of this argument, James S. Jeffers states in *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*, that “Death was a constant reality for Roman families This was true even in times of peace because of high infant and child mortality and diseases from which they had little protection.”⁴ Sociopolitical and health issues had a deadly impact on the Roman society, especially health issues. Specifically, Jeffers claims that “about 80 percent of the burial inscriptions discovered in the Roman port city of Ostia were for persons younger than thirty years old.”⁵ These young people died at an early age primarily from diseases and not war. Likewise, Riley notes that the majority of people did not reach their forties and very few passed that age because of severe poverty and diseases in the empire. He says,

The average person in the time of Jesus, however, faced a much less optimistic future . . . women who survived to childbearing age lived about twelve more years, and men who survived childhood died around the age of thirty But whatever the locale or class few people lived beyond forty, and barely one percent reached sixty.⁶

For this reason, the majority did not have much to hope for in the future for they died so young and with anxieties. Young men died younger than women but women were more vulnerable in childbirth and motherhood. If the women were among the very few that lived up to sixty years old, they were left with even greater risk and responsibility.

³ Koester, interview, *Frontline*.

⁴ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 44.

⁵ Jeffers, 44.

⁶ Riley, *River of God*, 173.

Besides extreme economic and political conflicts, social pressures also seemed heartless for the masses of the empire. Roman society was structured hierarchically, which assigned leadership and authority to the very few elite at the top of the social status, as in Tongan society. Jeffers claims that the small group of “the senatorial, equestrian, and decurion orders . . . made up only about 1 percent of the population but they constituted the leadership of almost all elements of public life—far more so than modern America.”⁷ The Roman traditional social order was extremely rigid and was based on heredity, wealth, citizenship and gender. Those very few who inherited leadership and wealth also consumed the slum of the empire through taxations and others like the *‘inasi* (offering of the first-fruits) in Tongan society. As Borg states, “The elites used two primary means of extracting wealth: taxation and of peasant production and ownership of agricultural land.”⁸ Thus, the economic gulf between the elites and the peasants was vast. Besides heredity and wealth, social status was also based on gender. Men had higher status than women, and women’s social status depended on their relationship to their fathers and husbands. Men were the head of the household both for the rich and the poor, and men alone could own property. Therefore, men held a higher social status and had more wealth than women. In Roman society, even though there were ways for the poor or ex-slave to be elevated in the social order, the ruling classes were obliged to preserve the boundaries of class. As Cicero said, “Rank must be preserved.”⁹ Similar to that in Tongan society, the hierarchy in the Roman society was almost impossible to break through, as class was hereditary and static because they

⁷ Jeffers, 182.

⁸ Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 135.

⁹ Jeffers, 191.

owned the land and taxed the peasants for its use as well as its productions. In brief, Borg summarizes the Greco-Roman society and culture as “intrinsically hierarchical, economically exploitative, and politically oppressive.”¹⁰ Therefore, early Christianity offered an alternative to these socioeconomic, political, and health issues of the masses of the empire and brought new hope into their lives by providing social and welfare support, and egalitarian community with sense of belonging and human worth.

Deities and Religions

Besides socioeconomic and political conflicts, the masses of the Roman Empire found no hope in their deities because they were so many and foreign, as hierarchical and exclusive as the society at large, very expensive to worship and maintain, and religiously unsatisfactory because they were also treated cruelly. Holland Lee Hendrix equates the numerous numbers of gods and religious options to shopping in a supermarket for god.¹¹ Scholars agree that there were lots of different religions with innumerable deities before and at the time of the rise of Christianity in which many were seeking help and hope for their struggles. However, the Greeks were proud of their rich civilization, philosophy, and politics, and generally of their gods and religions. Jonathan Hills claims that Cicero, one of the great politicians and philosophers of the first century BCE, proudly stated that “If we are to compare our national characteristics with those of foreign peoples, we shall find that, while in all other respects we are only the equals or even the inferiors of others, yet in the sense of religion, that is in worship for the gods, we are far superior.”¹² Despite the glories of the Roman Empire, including their gods and religion, the masses found

¹⁰ Borg, *God We Never Knew*, 136.

¹¹ Holland L. Hendrix, interview, *Frontline*.

¹² Jonathan Hill, *Christianity: How a Despised Sect from a Minority Religion Came to Dominate the Roman Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 110.

these gods and religions unsatisfactory because they also mirrored the tyranny in the society. Borg claims, “In these societies, religion most often functional to legitimate the social order: God had ordained that it be this way. At least the religion of the elites did, as it has come down to us through their retainers of priests and scribes.”¹³ The elites controlled every aspect of life in this society such as politics, economics, and religion. Thus, the gods of the elites were powerful than the peasant. For instance, the most powerful Roman deity was Jupiter who became the Roman state deity. Like Greco-Roman society, and ancient Tongan society, these gods ruled hierarchically according to their power and functions.¹⁴ However, people’s obligatory duty was to serve these gods through proper rituals. E. Glenn Hinson states: “the religions of the Roman Empire fell into three categories: the state cultus revived by Octavian, the oriental religions which attracted the masses, and the philosophies which functioned increasingly as the religion of the better educated.”¹⁵ The three categories will be discussed as follows: state, philosophers, and oriental religions, with focus primarily on the reasons for their decline and the success of Christianity.

State Cults

The state cult was very expensive to maintain, and people found them religiously unsatisfactory. It employed trained priests and priestesses to offer proper rituals to the gods on behalf of the adherents. These Greek and Roman gods did not demand strong moral behavior because their satisfaction was not based on one’s behavior, but on a

¹³ Borg, *God We Never Knew*, 136.

¹⁴ Among the twelve Olympians, Zeus was the father of the gods, the most powerful and wisest, and head of the pantheon; Poseidon (brother of Zeus) ruled over the seas, and Hades (brother of Zeus) ruled over the underworld and the dead. With all the other gods, the gods lived as in an extended family of their own laws and hierarchy. In other words, the gods of the Greco-Roman world, especially the gods of Mt. Olympus, lived in an exclusive society of their own.

¹⁵ Hinson, *Church Triumphant*, 9.

proper observance of religious rituals. These religious rituals were obligatory. To persuade the gods to favor the requests, a worshipper might make offerings of food or a ritual sacrifice of an animal before eating it. Thus, the state cult religion did not really have a moral system to expand adherents' or society's virtuous behavior. Everett Ferguson quotes H. J. Rose's claims in *Religion in Greece and Rome* that one of the differences between Christianity and ancient Greek religion is that "the religion of ancient Greece had no creed and, although certain actions were irreligious and therefore generally condemned as displeasing to supernatural powers, there was nothing like a code or system of morality which must be accepted by everyone who worshipped Athena or Zeus."¹⁶ Though rituals were obligatory, the gods seemed apathetic to the interests of the worshippers, such as their morality and virtues. Hence, the state cult lacked personal relationship with the deities and the warmth of personal appeal.

On the other hand, it seems that pagan gods might not have moral systems within themselves either, for they were known for doing terrible things against one another, and also to their adherents. Stark states, "They [pagan gods] do terrible things to one another, and sometimes they play ugly pranks on humans. But, for the most part, they appear to pay little attention to things down below."¹⁷ In addition to the gods treating the worshippers unfairly, these obligatory religious rituals became a financial burden to them, especially for the poor. Stark declares, "After all, paganism was expensive to maintain, since it was embodied in elaborate temples, was served by professional priests, and depended on lavish festivals as the primary mode of participation."¹⁸ Another

¹⁶ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 138.

¹⁷ Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 211.

¹⁸ Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 198.

example of the expensive pagan religions was reported by Tertullian, a first-century Christian apologist and polemicist, in his *Apology* 39:

The Salii cannot have their feast without going into debt; you must get the accountants to tell you what the tenths of Hercules and the sacrificial banquets cost; the choicest cook is appointed for the Apaturia, the Dionysia, the Attic mysteries; the smoke from the banquet of Serapis will call out the firemen.

Greek religion also was very expensive to maintain and it worsened the economy for individuals as well as the society as a whole. It made it impossible for the poor, women, and children to convert to, or maintain, these cults. Like Tongan *misinale* (annual giving to the church) and customary celebrations, the Salii contributed in their religious activities even up to the point of bankruptcy.

In addition, Marvin W. Meyer concludes his research on Greek religion in *The Ancient Mysteries* with a significant and specific claim that the fall of Greek religion was due to adherents' religious dissatisfaction. He concludes,

In sum, the Olympians began to fall from glory for several reasons. Their destiny was linked to that of the Greek polis, which was no longer the basic political unit in the world of Alexander's time. Furthermore, the philosophical criticism of religion that took place before and during the Hellenistic period challenged Greek beliefs and exposed the gods as unworthy of the worship and devotion of thoughtful Greek people. . . . Nonetheless, the hearts of many were turning away, searching at home and abroad for gods that would satisfy more fully their religious longings.¹⁹

For Meyer, the fall of the Greek religion, especially the state cult, was related to the shift of the political unit from the Greek polis to cosmopolitan and philosophical criticism of the Olympian pantheon. The ancient philosophers criticized the credibility of the Olympian gods to be worshipped, especially in the elite and educated circle. As a result, many people turned away from Greek religion and the Olympian gods and searched for

¹⁹ Marvin W. Meyer, ed., introduction to *The Ancient Mysteries: A Source Book; Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean World*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 3.

new religions and gods who could satisfy their religious needs. Therefore, several found the God of Christianity more appealing to satisfy their religious needs than the Olympian gods and so they converted to Christianity.

Philosophers' Cults

The philosophers' cults diminished because of being an exclusive religion for the educated group, which lacked moral appeal but was chiefly based on philosophical reasoning. This cult taught that religious virtues were based on knowledge or philosophical teachings and reasons. Philosophers, especially of Stoicism and Platonism, posited a transcendent single deity opposing the many Greek and Roman deities. Thus, they looked down upon and mocked other religions, especially Christianity, as a religion of the uneducated people. As Hill states,

Educated people mocked Christian doctrines as credible only to those with weak minds. It seems to have been a commonplace among intellectuals that Christianity was a religion for stupid people. The second-century A. D. physician Galen, made it clear that he thought Christians were not enormously intelligent. . . . But he did admire the Christians for their lifestyle, which he thought just as good as that of real philosophers.²⁰

For philosophers, Christianity was a religion for the poor and uneducated people primarily because of their thoughtless teachings about a God who loved the world and a redeemer, Jesus, who died. This is evident when Paul addressed the Corinthians about the Greeks' view of the doctrine of the cross. Paul says, "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness"²¹ Though Christian teachings did not seem logical to the educated people, some respected Christian morality for they had some similarity. Hinson states,

²⁰ Hill, 112.

²¹ 1 Cor. 1:18, 23 (NASB).

“Christianity gives most of its attention to moral preparation and presents its truths in such a simple way that the masses give themselves diligently to the pursuit of virtue and the stamp of godliness is set on their behavior.”²² However, Christian moral teachings appealed more to the masses of the empire because they were plain and simple enough for the uneducated people.

Several scholars claim that though philosophers attempted to add new philosophies to their old Greek beliefs, their lack of religious morality was another disadvantage of Greek religion, especially for the state and philosophers’ cults. Burton S. Easton correctly observes that mere education or philosophizing is not enough to transform one’s life without the deity’s power and religion. Hence, the lack of moral appeal is the failure of the Greco-Roman religions. Easton claims, “That it was a rank polytheism was not so much the trouble, except to the more intelligent Its failure lay in its lack of moral appeal.”²³ The lack of this moral appeal was due to the immorality of the polytheistic gods of the empire, not only among them but to humanity, and that was another reason the philosophers criticized the wholly underserved of those worshipping these gods. Stark claims that the great philosopher Aristotle “taught that gods could feel no love for mere humans. Classical mythology abounds in stories in which the gods do wicked things to humans—often for the sport of it.”²⁴ Philosophers criticized the heartlessness of the gods of Greek religion toward its adherents as discussed in the previous section. Ancient Greek philosophers taught that hopelessness was humans’ fate

²² Hinson, *Church Triumphant*, 170.

²³ Burton S. Easton, “Why the New Faith Penetrated the Gentile World,” in *An Outline of Christianity: The Story of Our Civilization*, vol. 1, *The Birth of Christianity*, ed. Ernest Findlay Scott and Burton Scott Easton (New York: Bethlehem Publishers, 1926), 209.

²⁴ Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 200.

and nothing can be done about it, but to apathetically accept it. Easton takes the philosophical view that

the true pagan's chief emotion was generally one of helpless despair. . . . A very eminent contemporary philosophy boldly declares that despair is the only proper basis for human lives. The early philosophers then . . . taught that all men can do is to accept fate with indifference; but human instincts rebelled, and sought for a way of escape.²⁵

Though philosophers taught that despair was the human fate, Christianity responded that there is hope beyond human despair. Christianity brought new hope and more achievable meanings to the life all people of the world and was really appealing to the masses of the empire. Although philosophers, especially Platonists, pursued the same goal to find the universal means of liberating the soul, Christianity succeeded because it made the means of liberation available exclusively to all people.²⁶ Thus, the accessibility and openness to all people was possibly the key to the success of Christianity over the philosophers' cults.

Oriental Cults

The oriental religions faded because of their exclusiveness of salvation and community. These religions separated themselves from community and excluded women. Oriental religions included public worship, like state cult and philosophers, but with more personal connection with deities. As Jeffers states, "The mystery religions . . . in addition to their desire for redemption, they emphasized the pursuit of a sense of oneness with their god and ultimately the attainment of morality."²⁷ In contrary to state cult and philosophers, oriental (mystery) religion emphasized high morality and salvation through religious rituals to draw adherents closer to the deity. C. K. Barrett writes,

²⁵ Easton, 210.

²⁶ John Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 135.

²⁷ Jeffers, 96.

The object of the mystery cults was to secure salvation for men [women] who were subject to moral and physical evil, dominated by Destiny, and unable by themselves to escape from the corruption that beset the material side of their nature. Salvation accordingly meant escape from Destiny, release from the corruption and a renewed moral life. It was effected by what may broadly be called sacramental means. By taking part in prescribed rites the worshipper became united with God, was enabled in this life to enjoy mystical union with him, and further assured of immortality beyond death.²⁸

Like Christianity, oriental cults intended to liberate adherents from despair and human fate through rites, such as sacraments, and to bring them into a right relationship with the deity for the renewal of life. By this, adherents could assure salvation and hope for eternal life. For the purpose of this section, discussion is limited to Mithraism because scholars posit that it was the closest mystery cult and religion to Christianity out of all the pagan cults. In his book, *Kingdom and Community*, John G. Gager states the similarities between Christianity and Mithras:

Both religions were Oriental in origin and both transmitted an ancient tradition (Jewish and Persian) in a new form (Christian and Mithraic). Both demanded a serious commitment from the adherents; in Mithraism, the initiate was required to repent and be baptized on entering the cult and then to advance slowly through seven successive grades. Both set high moral standards for all believers, and both centered on a cultic hero whose own career was symbolized by a victory achieved through struggle. So close were the similarities in certain areas that various Christian writers felt the need to account for them²⁹

Justin Martyr was one of those writers who tried to differentiate Christianity from Mithras rites such as the Lord's Supper. Even though there were other factors that contributed to the decline of Mithras, such as the adoption of Christianity into the state religion by the emperor Constantine, Gager posits two characteristics of Mithraism that perhaps contributed to its failure: first, the exclusion of women, and second, the

²⁸ C. K. Barrett, ed., "Mystery Religion," in *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 120.

²⁹ Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, 132.

establishment of the sectors of society.³⁰ These two characteristics were offensive to the majority of the population. The exclusion of women was primarily a cultural issue. However, women were mostly excluded from many social gatherings because their primary responsibilities were in the home. Separation from the majority of the society was also a disadvantage of many ancient cults, (such as Mithras, Qumran community, and Pharisees). In addition, another significant characteristic of the oriental cult that contributed to its failure was the financial burden to join and to maintain membership.

High fees for initiatory rites hindered entrance, with correspondingly advanced charges for admission to the inner stages; one convert to the Isis cult has left on record that he had to sell his entire patrimony to meet the sums demanded. Poor men consequently were excluded from all but the most vulgar of the systems.³¹

Oriental cults were very expensive, demanding, and restricted mostly to men and were discouraging for women and children to be part of them. Thus it was impossible for a whole family to join a cult, such as Mithras and Isis, in Greek religion.

To sum up this section, some of the characteristics of the Greek and Roman religions that contributed mostly to their failure and the success of Christianity were that they were primarily exclusive and inaccessible for all, especially for women and children, because of their social status and responsibility, and for the educated and elite because philosophers' cults were about philosophical knowledge and only a few were qualified.

Judaism

Judaism of the first century was a monotheistic religion contrary to Greek and Roman polytheistic religions.³² The emphasis on monotheism was one of the primary

³⁰ Gager, 134.

³¹ Easton, 212.

³² Israelites of the pre-exilic century were probably polytheists as later prohibited in the Old Testament, such as in the Mosaic Law. Yet, scholars believed that Abraham was the first monotheist.

characteristics of Jewish beliefs. They believed that Yahweh was the one and only true and living God, dissimilar to Greek and Roman gods. Because of the holiness and transcendence of Yahweh, his name was kept sacred and not spoken.

Additionally, similar to Greek and Roman religions, Judaism was a public religion where professional priests served in the temple to present the adherents' sacrifices to Yahweh.³³ The temple was the center of Jewish religious lives because of Yahweh's presence, a sacrificial system, and being a place of prayer. Hence, Jews were similar to Greeks and Romans in defining religion in terms of action, by observing religious rituals, and not belief. For instance, one could identify a Jew by his observance of circumcision and the Sabbath. Nevertheless, the Jewish religious rituals were predominantly observed in the temple with the service of professional priests. In the temple, however, there were physical barriers, or courts, that separated the Jews from the non-Jews, and men from women. These courts were highly restricted and anyone who crossed these physical barriers would be punished by death. As Ferguson states, the inscription placed on the wall of the temple proper read, "No man of another nation is to enter within the barrier and enclosure around the temple. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his death which follows."³⁴ The temple, one of the significant symbols of Jewish people and Judaism, was an exclusive institution like the Jews' society. Judaism reflected the hierarchy and patriarchy of the Jewish culture.

In addition to the significance of the temple, the Jewish sacred text, the scripture, includes Yahweh's revelation from Abraham on to Moses at Mt. Sinai and the giving of the code of law or Torah which provided a system of religious morality, strictly taught

³³ Priests source of revenue were perquisites from sacrificial animals, first-fruits of the grain and fruit harvests, and tithes which were primarily donated by worshippers.

³⁴ Ferguson, 529.

monotheism and obligatory covenant with God, which promised prosperity to the obedient and sure punishment to the disobedient. Riley comments on the Jewish traditional belief in this covenantal and obligatory relationship and the prosperity that obedience would offer. He states,

The sacred stories of the old culture claimed that the gods rewarded the righteous and punished the wicked in this life. We read of the favorites of the gods who were blessed with health, wealth, and long life for their faithfulness and obedience to the divine will. The average lifespan in the stories of the patriarchs of the Old Testament, for example, was more than 150 years³⁵

The patriarchs of the Old Testament were the evidence of that Jewish thought; however, the rewards for the righteous and the punishments for the wicked all happened in this life. Nothing took place beyond death for it was the end of life. For instance, the psalmist states clearly that the dead people were forsaken in the grave and had no hope at all for they were isolated from God.³⁶ The psalmist portrayed this old monistic culture and the Old Testament view that the traditional Judaism had maintained. Up to the time of Jesus and the rise of Christianity, different groups within Judaism had disagreed with each other on this concept. As Riley notes,

After the Exile, right through the entire period of the second temple, Jerusalem and its cults were dominated in the main by those who held to traditional Israelite conceptions as expressed in the Torah—that is, a this-world orientation of rewards and punishments with no after life. This was the view of the Sadducees, the sect that held most of the power in the time of Jesus.³⁷

Sadducees maintained this traditional view that there was no resurrection of the dead. Again, Josephus added that Sadducees do not believe in fate, accept no observation apart from the laws, and reject traditions of the Pharisees. As Riley claims, after the exile, Jews

³⁵ Riley, *River of God*, 173.

³⁶ Psalm 88 (NRSV).

³⁷ Riley, *River of God*, 160.

had access to other religions, especially Zoroastrianism, and learned about dualism of body and soul and the afterlife. The dualism and others was a new development in Judaism which led to a new breath of hope not only in this life but in the afterlife. In contrast, Pharisees advocated that the soul is imperishable, so there will be resurrection for the dead, but the soul of the wicked will be punished. Moreover, Pharisees believed in fate, free will, and God. This hope for resurrection and afterlife was developed in the second temple era and understood it to be eschatological. Hill writes,

There was also a strong current among some Jewish groups of eschatology, or interest in the end times. Many believed that God would, at some point, make a massive personal intervention in history, when all wrongs would be righted; this would effectively be the end of the world and the beginning of something new and better. This way of thinking had its roots in various passages from the prophetic writings, some of which predicted that a new King David (one of the great heroes of Jewish history) would emerge in the end times.³⁸

Because of extended oppression and prolonged delaying, different interpretations of this hope arose to revive that hope. Probably the most expected one was political in nature in which people hoped that a God-anointed Davidic Messiah could remove the Roman Empire and restore the kingdom of Israel.

Additionally, it is significant to also look at the development of Jewish hope from the Old Testament through Jesus' time because it evolved with their understandings of God and expectation of new life in this life and the afterlife. I think that the success of Christianity in this era was primarily due to the message and works of hope they brought into the lives of the masses of the empire.

³⁸ Hill, 11.

The Traditional Judaism (Old Testament) View of Hope

According to Jewish religion, hope was in God and God could reward it only to the righteousness in this earthly life. Thus, there was no hope for the unrighteous but punishments, and the righteous hope was only in God. For example, the Psalmists declare that the righteous hope upon the Lord and God is his confidence.³⁹ Certainly, Jewish hope was based on God, trust in God, and in the promises of God. According to Bultmann, “The life of the righteous is grounded in hope. To have hope, to have a future, is a sign that things are well with us. This hope is naturally directed to God.”⁴⁰ Then, hope is referred to as what God will do as a reward for the righteous people in this life. As Riley states, “If one sacrificed one’s life in the old monistic cultures, one died, went to the underworld, and was gone forever; long life was one of the promised rewards for a righteous life.”⁴¹ The Jews’ hope in the Old Testament, monistic world, was limited to the righteous only in this earthly life. There was no hope beyond death and the grave. Riley maintains, “Such views were in continuity with the traditions of Mesopotamia and Canaan, and similar to that in archaic Greece, that the departed could expect little more than a shadowy existence in Sheol/Hades under the earth.”⁴² In other words, as far as the Old Testament or the Jewish religion was concerned, hope was certainly a this-worldly hope for God’s acts of mercy in the future to bring rain and yield for the field, prosperity, and longevity. Jewish hope was based on a conditional covenant with God to those who

³⁹ Ps. 31: 24; 38:15; 39:7; 42:5,11; 43:5; 62:5; 71:5,14; 119:49,116,166; 130:5,7; 131:3; 146:5.

⁴⁰ Gerhard Kittel, ed., “ἐλπίς,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2. (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 522.

⁴¹ Riley, *River of God*, 163.

⁴² Gregory J. Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 10.

obeyed it. The Old Testament books, especially the prophetic books, contain that kind of this-worldly message of hope.

Hellenistic Judaism View of Hope

Like the Jewish Religion view of hope stated in the Old Testament, Hellenistic Judaism also claimed that hope belongs to God and life. People have hope in this life, such as hope for healing, prosperity, and longevity, but this hope ends by death. As Bultmann expresses, “. . . hope belongs to life (Sir. 14:2) and that it is extinguished only by death (Ps. Sol. 17:2).”⁴³ Bultmann, however, differentiates hope for the godly and the ungodly because the hope of the godly is not extinguished by death. He says,

The hope of the ungodly is κενή, (Wis. 3:11; cf. 5:14; 16:29) or ἄδηλος (2 Macc. 7:34). When they die, they have no ἐλπίς (Wis. 3:18). . . . This hope is denied to the ungodly, but the ἐλπίς of the righteous is . . . It extends to the resurrection (2 Macc. 7:11,14,20). . . . There is also eschatological hope of the restoration of Israel (2 Macc. 2:18; Test. B.10:11) or of the time of salvation, as attested in Rabb[inic] and esp[ecially] apoc[alyptic] literature.⁴⁴

For Bultmann, the hope (ἐλπίς) of the godly continues beyond death for it was immaterial hope while the ungodly (κενή) end by death for it is material hope. Unlike the Jewish view in the Old Testament, Hellenistic Judaism believed that there is hope in the afterlife and the resurrection of the dead, possibly influenced by Zoroastrianism (dualism) and Greek philosophers, but only for the godly. For that reason, they also had hoped that in the end Israel would also be restored. The Hellenistic view of hope was eschatological both for the individual (righteous) and the universal (Israel).

⁴³ Kittel, 529.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Rabbinic Judaism View of Hope

From the perspective of Rabbinic Judaism, hope is strongly stressed in the future primarily on the Messianic hope, which is possibly less in this life. As Karl Heinrich Rengstorf states, “Indeed, it directed its thoughts very much to the future More particularly the Messianic hope was an extraordinarily strong concern of Palestinian Judaism and its leaders in the 1st and 2nd centuries of our era.”⁴⁵ Like Judaism in the Old Testament and the Hellenistic view, hope is in God’s hand; however, only the Hellenistic and Rabbinic Judaism have hope in the afterlife and resurrection. Furthermore, Rengstorf claims that the promise of the coming of the Messiah was given only to Jewish people as a whole. In order for the non-Jews to share in that promise, they should become like Jews and be circumcised and then observe the Torah. Rengstorf states,

For the promises were given to Israel as a totality rather than to Israel as an aggregate of individuals. The people as such received the promised blessings that belong to God. For this reason, non-Jews can participate in the promised blessings only if by circumcision they become fully authorized and fully committed members of the people and the congregation.⁴⁶

On the contrary, Rengstorf declares that some of the great rabbis were uncertain of the promised blessings as universal hope. He adds, “That there is no universal hope possible under nomism is nowhere more clearly stated than by the Johannine Jesus in Jn. 5:45: ἔστιν ὁ κατηγορῶν ὑμῶν Μωϋσῆς, εἰς ὃν ὑμεῖς ἠλπίκατε [Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope].”⁴⁷ Therefore, rabbis restated their views to affirm their certainty of salvation. Rengstorf concludes his discussion of the uncertainty of (personal) salvation by saying

⁴⁵ Kittel, 524.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Kittel, 528.

that “hope arises when man learns to see that he can do nothing for his own salvation, not by the way of attainment, but by a gift *sola gratia* [by grace alone].”⁴⁸ Similar to the previous views, hope and salvation is in God; however, for Rabbinic Judaism, it’s a gift received by God’s grace alone and not by keeping the covenant or Torah.

⁴⁸ Kittel, 529.

CHAPTER 4

Gospel of Hope and Success of Christianity

To develop a more vital ministry for Tongan FWC and immigrant UMC that addresses the unfavorable influence of Tongan ancient religion, it is so critical to investigate the success of early Christianity within the context of the religions and culture of the Greco-Roman world. Scholars believe that Christianity brought new hope to the ordinary people of the Greco-Roman world. This hope, as Riley says, promised “a better way to live and a better way to die.”¹ To be succinct, discussion is limited as follows: Section 1: A Better Way to Live: (a) New Community; (b) New Religion, and (c) New Identity. Section 2: A Better Way to Die: (a) Resurrection; and (b) Eternal life.

Section 1: A Better Way to Live

New Community

Serve the Needs of the Community

Certainly, scholars agree that the wealth of the Roman Empire was unequally shared among the very few on top of the social order that controlled most leadership in the empire. As a result of this, very few became wealthy and the majority became very poor. Besides this elite class, other religions did not require their adherents to share their wealth with others, especially the masses of the empire, leading to an increase in poverty and enormous gap between the elites and the masses. Early Christianity responded to that social need and shared with one another and served the needs of the hopeless poor in the community. Representing this view, Koester makes a strong point that “one should not see the success of Christianity simply on the level of a great religious message; one has to see it also in the consistent and very well thought out establishment of institutions to

¹ Riley, *River of God*, 180.

serve the needs of the community.”² This service started in and within Christian community and later developed into a larger body of social welfare institutions like hospitals, which will be discussed later on. However, it is evident in the New Testament; for instance, in the Book of Acts, Luke states that the followers of Jesus were increasing in number and some of the Hellenistic Jews had complaints against the native Hebrews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. Therefore, the twelve disciples elected Stephen with six others to be the food servers and to be in charge of other public services.³ In Christian community, they inclusively cared for the needs of every individual. Moreover, Paul raised funds from other well off churches, such as Achaia and Macedonia, for the poor members in the churches in Jerusalem.⁴ The early Christianity formed a new community that served the needs of its members and provided social support for the hopeless people.

Additionally, as mentioned above, common people struggled poverty and diseases, leading many people to die at a very young age. Christians created a new community that revitalized the local life of the ordinary people. As Horsley claims, “In attempting to deal with the heavy indebtedness, poverty, and despair that plagued many of the people, the Jesus movement advocated mutual forgiveness of debts, social-economic cooperation, and other forms of reciprocity in local communities.”⁵ Again, the Christian community excelled beyond serving physical needs to economic relief and it attracted the majority to convert to Christianity. In this way, Gerd Theissen argues in the conclusion of his book, *Sociology of Early Palestine Christianity*, that Christianity

² Helmut Koester, interview, *Frontline*.

³ Acts 6:1-6 (NASB).

⁴ Romans 15:26-27 (NASB).

⁵ Richard A. Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 128.

succeeded in the Hellenistic world because “the message of reconciliation and love is given added force . . . may have been born in a society rent by crises.”⁶ This Christian model of social support and helping one another within and beyond the community also influenced others from different religions. This kind of message and deeds of love and care were extremely appealing in a society that lacked them. As Horsley states, “One of the features of the churches that most impressed later pagan observers, even opponents such as Celsus or Lucian, was the Christians’ concrete care of each other.”⁷ Even the pagans recognized the difference between this unique way of life of Christianity from their own. As result, many left pagan religions and converted to Christianity. White indicates that “Christianity was beginning to grow in substantial ways by the late second and early third century precisely because it was responding to some basic, deeply felt human needs. . . . The church becomes, in a lot of ways, a new kind of social welfare agency in the Roman Empire.”⁸ Because the Roman Empire did not have a social welfare agency to serve the needs of its people, many looked to the Christian community. Beyond that, the empire also learned from Christianity and later built social welfare institutions, such as hospitals. Theissen elaborates it more and makes a convincing argument that “when Christianity reorganized the empire . . . to give the state internal support at a time of increasing social pressure, Christianity became more and more the social cement of the totalitarian state of late antiquity.”⁹ The power of the early Christianity’s caring community that served the needs of the masses developed to reform

⁶ Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 112.

⁷ Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement*, 124.

⁸ L. Michael White, interview, *Frontline*.

⁹ Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christian*, 112, 118.

the empire. Because of this, Christianity became the state religion of the Greco-Roman Empire.

Sense of Belonging

Christian community did not merely focus on serving the needs of the locals, but they served it in way that many people felt they belonged to it. The sense of belonging was very significant in the Greco-Roman world because of socio-political and socio-economical pressures that caused many people to migrate and find places with better life. White makes a significant point that serving the people's needs, probably the immigrants in Diaspora, led them to feel at home or belong to a loving and caring community so they converted to Christian community. He maintains that

with new immigrant groups, all of them trying to find their way into Roman society – to make it in the Roman world, to be a part of the mainstream, to march up the ladder of success – belonging is one of the key issues, and what Christians offer probably as well as or better than anybody else in the Roman world is a sense of belonging. To be part of the Christian community . . . to be part of the church, is to belong to a society of closely knit friends, brothers and sisters and Christ, and it may be something as simple as that that spells the [basis] of the success of Christianity in the Roman world.¹⁰

The sense of belonging to a loving and caring community helped migrants who had been displaced from their homes because of debts and looked to a new place. Christianity provided a new community and a sense of belonging to those who had completely lost their ancestral villages. This was probably one of the factors in the success of the early church in the Greco-Roman world. In the same way, Dodds states it convincingly that the sense of belonging to a Christian community was a “major cause, perhaps the strongest single cause, of the spread of Christianity.”¹¹ This argument is based on Dodds' claims

¹⁰ White, interview, *Frontline*.

¹¹ Dodds, 138.

for the spread of Christianity in the great cities, such as Antioch, Rome, and Alexandria.¹² The sense of belonging to a community that served their needs attracted many people to Christianity from both small and big cities over all the empire.

Furthermore, after Gager makes a comparison of possible factors for the popular appeal of Christianity to both Jewish and Hellenistic Christians, he proposes twofold factors. He claims that the first one is

a series of external circumstances that were completely beyond its control . . . and a single, overriding internal factor, the radical sense of Christian community—open to all, insistent on absolute and exclusive loyalty, and concerned for every aspect of the believer's life. From the very beginning, the one distinctive gift of Christianity was this sense of community. . . . Christian congregations provide a unique opportunity for masses of people to discover a sense of security and self-respect.¹³

Christianity created a community that fostered a sense of self-worth, belonging, and welcome with loving and open arms to everyone. Christianity did not only serve physical needs but also psychological hungers of people who wandered looking for opportunity.

In addition, Paula Fredriksen takes it further and makes a significant point that the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas impose “an intense sense of community that binds together these people who are insisting on being martyred. They take care of each other.”¹⁴ The significance of a community that served their basic needs and loved them helped to hold them tightly together even in a time of persecution. With many scholars, Hinson obviously states, “Christianity spread chiefly through the sustained effort to organize Christian communities, vying with Judaism and the mystery cults to win adherents . . . deserve the most credit for the spread of Christianity . . .”¹⁵ As discussed

¹² Dodds, 138.

¹³ Gager, 140.

¹⁴ Paula Fredriksen, interview, *Frontline*.

¹⁵ Hinson, *Church Triumphant*, 40, 44.

above, a new community that Christians formed to serve the needs of local people with love and care, and to give them a sense self-worth and status, is the good news, and a great multitude joined Christianity because they felt they belonged.

Welfare Institution

As discussed above, Christian community started as a small group caring for their own needs. However, Christians multiplied and Christianity was stronger and they formed an institution that cared for the community at large. As Koester claims, the success of Christian community was due to their establishment of the welfare institutions to serve the needs of the community. He declares,

Christianity really established a realm of mutual social support for the members that joined the church. And I think that this was probably in the long run an enormously important factor for the success of the Christian mission. And it was for that very reason that Constantine saw that the only thing that would rescue the empire is to take over the institutions that the Christians had already built up, [including], . . . institutions of education. . .¹⁶

For Koester, the fact that Christianity formed a community that served as a welfare institution to serve the needs of the people is the key to the success of Christianity. He also makes a convincing argument that Constantine later saw the effectiveness of Christianity as a welfare agency and extended it for his empire. Graydon F. Snyder explains it in detail by saying that the Christian community caring system had a major impact on the Greco-Roman health system. He says,

As a result of the inculturation of the Jesus tradition caring-healing became a mark of religious piety. Furthermore, the established church developed institutions to care for the ill. In 335 Constantine decreed the building of hospitals in Rome, Ephesus, Constantinople, and elsewhere.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Koester, interview, *Frontline*.

¹⁷ Graydon F. Snyder, *Inculturation of the Jesus Tradition: The Impact of Jesus on Jewish and Roman Cultures* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 201.

The Christian caring system later changed the Roman Empire from uncaring for the poor and unequal share of wealth, to building hospitals and institutions to serve the needs of the poor people of the empire.

Moral Institution

In addition to welfare institutions, Christianity also established its churches or communities as a caring place for the morality of its members, then spread it to the society. Wayne A. Meeks asks a significant question which posits the success of Christianity: What was there about this movement which could make that kind of appeal to people?¹⁸ Meeks sees it as having a different purpose of community, not as a welfare institution, but as a moral institution. He writes,

It [Christianity] offers a community which shapes the basic moral institutions of its members, which brings that kind of moral admonition, which otherwise, in the Roman world, we find . . . only in the schools of philosophers, which after all, is an elite phenomena, limited to a very small stratum of highly educated people. [Christianity] makes this [morality] available to perfectly ordinary folk.¹⁹

Meeks argues that Christianity also taught high morality—that was only available to the few elite and highly educated in the philosophers' cults—to ordinary people. Therefore, commoners joined Christianity to experience the high morality that the few educated people had learned from philosophers. As Elizabeth Clark claims, Christianity has “a very high moral standard” like some philosophical sects and groups. The ordinary people of the Greco-Roman world can share with the elite and philosophers the love of wisdom.

Strange Love

Christian teaching claimed the worship of a God of love who loved not only Christians but all people in the world of every ethnicity, social status, and religious

¹⁸ Wayne A. Meeks, interview, *Frontline*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

piety.²⁰ This Christian teaching is new and strange in the Greco-Roman world. God's love was revealed in the life and death of Jesus for all people. Thus, Jesus commanded his followers to love not only one another as followers of Christ, but also even their enemies. John states that brotherly/sisterly love was a new commandment entrusted by Jesus to his disciples. Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another."²¹ Brown argues that the command to love is not new, but "the Christian concept of love stemming from Jesus is new."²² A God of love embodied that unconditional love in Christ's life and death and he commanded his followers to love one another in the same way. Furthermore, in Matthew, Jesus also teaches his disciples a reformed commandment about love. Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"²³ Ulrich Luz argues that the love that Jesus meant was "related to Jesus' idea of God . . . different from the idea of God in Hellenistic parallels. His command to love one's enemy corresponds . . . to God's will . . . extreme love toward sinners and outcasts in the inbreaking of his kingdom."²⁴ Meeks describes it as "love in a strange way So that love is in some sense being redefined as this other-regarding sacrificial act . . . must have had a very powerful, emotional appeal to people."²⁵ It is a distinctively Christian idea that God's love is wide enough to embrace all people. God's love is not confined to any national group, like Israel, or spiritual elite, the righteous. It is a love that proceeds from

²⁰ 1 John 4:7-10, 16; Ephesians 2:4; John 3:16

²¹ John 13:34 (NASB).

²² Raymond E. Brown, ed. and trans., *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible, v. 29A: 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 614.

²³ Matthew 5:43-44 (NRSV).

²⁴ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 286.

²⁵ Meeks, interview, *Frontline*.

God's very nature that is holy love. Consequently, Christianity brought a new and a strange way of love into the Greco-Roman world and its religions and that was appealing to many people to join it.

Inclusive Community

Christianity also demonstrated an openness to all people, especially women and children. As Dodds argues, one of the reasons for the success of Christianity was the inclusiveness of Christian community. He states, "Christianity was open to all. In principle, it made no social distinction; it accepted the manual worker, the slave, the outcast, the ex-criminal" ²⁶ Even if some of the first disciples were still holding on to their traditional purity and exclusiveness, Jesus and Paul proclaimed that there is no prejudice in the kingdom of God and Christian community. As Paul puts it, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." ²⁷ For Koester, this statement by Paul is a baptismal formula used in the Christian community for initiation of new members.

Koester claims,

[This] baptismal formula is a sociological formula that defines a new community. Here is a community that invites you, which makes you an equal with all other members of that community. On the contrary, it gives even the lowliest slave personal dignity and status. Moreover the commandment of love is decisive. That is, the care for each other becomes very important. People are taken out of isolation. ²⁸

For Koester, this baptismal formula inclusively invites all people into Christian community where everyone would share equal social status and love for one another. In addition, Stark claims that Christian community not only promoted equal status for

²⁶ Dodds, 134.

²⁷ Galatians 3: 28 (NRSV).

²⁸ Koester, interview, *Frontline*.

women and slaves, but was also a supporting shelter for widows. He maintains that women also enjoyed better social conditions at the end of their married lives. Pagan widows were generally expected to remarry as soon as possible, at which point anything they owned would become the property of their new husband. But Christian widows faced no such pressure; if anything, remarriage was discouraged. The church provided funds to support those who could not support themselves.²⁹ Women had more freedom in the Christian community than the local community in the Roman Empire. The Church didn't require the widows to remarry but supported them psychologically and financially. In the Christian community, women were respected and welcomed into higher status and even shared leadership role with men. Stark claims that "The Christian clergy . . . took a step that separated them from the rabbis of Palestine . . . [T]hey welcomed women as patrons and even offered women roles in which they could act as collaborators."³⁰ For Stark the inclusiveness of women in Christian community is possibly one of the most attractive factors for the success of Christianity, especially for women and widows. Stark with other scholars claim that "Christianity was unusually appealing because within the Christian subculture women enjoyed far higher status than did women in the Greco-Roman world at large."³¹ Moreover, Stark concludes his study on the role of women in Christian growth by suggesting that Christianity was more appealing for women than men because of "prohibiting all forms of infanticide and abortion, Christians removed major causes of the gender imbalance that existed among pagans . . . women were more likely than men to become Christians. This, combined with the reduction in female

²⁹ Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 104.

³⁰ Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 109.

³¹ Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 95.

mortality, would have caused a surplus of women in the Christian subcultures.”³²

Women were attracted to Christianity because they had more freedom and respect within Christian community than among a pagan’s community and its religions. To illustrate, with comparison of Christianity to one its rival from Greek religion, Hinson asks a significant question: “Why Christianity and not Mithraism? Since these two, as Hinson claims, had many similarities such as some form of monotheism, strong moral teachings, promise of life after death, rites of initiation and passage which brought tangible assurance. Hinson argues that inclusiveness was the advantage of Christianity over Mithraism. He claims, “Christianity differed from Mithraism both in inclusiveness and exclusiveness. . . . Christianity included all persons . . . Christianity did not tolerate crossing lines to join other cults. . . .”³³ However, he also adds that exclusiveness is another advantage for Christians strictly taught against cultic religion. Therefore, Christians hardly returned to their old religion. Thus, one of the primary advantages of Christianity over any other religion was its inclusiveness of all people including women and children. Christianity was a mass movement and not a restricted cult for the elites. Consequently, Christianity brought new hope of life to women and the outcasts in the Greco-Roman society, that they had equal social status as others.

New Religion

Loving God

Christians boldly proclaimed that their God is the true living God similar to Judaism; however, God is love that was manifested in Jesus Christ, the true revelation

³² Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 99.

³³ Hinson, *Church Triumphant*, 78

and only way to God.³⁴ By this the early church believed that they surpassed other religions in the Greco-Roman world. Thus, Christians refused to worship and sacrifice to any gods besides the God of Christianity. Riley traces the rise of Christianity in the context of other Greco-Roman religion and writes, “Christian philosophers for the first three hundred years and more showed time and again how Christianity built upon and then superseded the best results of the philosophers and cults of the Jews, Greeks, and Romans.”³⁵ For Christians, as Paul states, the mystery of God that was kept secret for ages, and from other religions, is now revealed through Jesus Christ and his gospel that they preached. God revealed God-self in Jesus Christ because God loved the world, all people and all creation. As stated in the Gospel of John, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”³⁶ In contrast to Greek religions and their gods, as discussed above, the God of Christians is a God of love for all people. Stark claims that to say that God loves the world is an entirely new idea that other religions didn’t have.³⁷ Similarly, Meeks also claims that the God who loves is a strange idea in the ancient world.

Additionally, Pagels claims that the nature of the God of Christianity and how God related and manifested to people was very powerful and appealing to the majority of people. In contrast to the gods of Greek/Roman religions who look like the aristocrats—the emperor and his courts she says, “But here is a religion which claims that God is made manifest in a peasant”³⁸ It was a great setback to the Greek and Roman

³⁴ John 14:6; 17:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:9; 1 John 5:20.

³⁵ Gregory J. Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs: How Jesus Inspired Not One True Christianity, But Many* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 150.

³⁶ John 3:16 (NRSV).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Elaine H. Pagels, interview, *Frontline*.

religions and particularly to the state cult. The God of love of Christianity was revealed in a peasant and simply related and appealed to the masses of the society and the outcast. For example, the Pharisees accused Jesus for being a friend and eating with tax collectors and sinners.³⁹ Throughout the four Gospels, Jesus associates with the poor, the outcast, the sinners, and serves their needs and heals their illnesses. By this, Kurt Aland argues,

This message of justification of the sinner, I believe, is what brought Christianity the victory over the 'competing religions' of late antiquity. It is true that in Christianity man is also separated from God, just as in paganism, which speaks about a transcendent god who is infinitely distant from man. But in Christianity this God who is separated from man is still not far away, but near to him. And further: man does not rise by his own powers to God as in paganism, but God himself descends to man and graciously draws him in love to himself. This is just as foreign or offensive to the Jews as to the Greeks.⁴⁰

Christianity portrays a God who loves all people no matter who and what, and manifested that love in Jesus' life and death as a sacrificial love so that the world may have eternal life. Christians had confidence since God is near and will be with them until the end of the age to empower and guide them through because he loves them. Christians brought a new religion with a new deity, a God who loves the world and made a sacrifice of himself, and did not require sacrifices from poor people, so that everyone may be with him now and forever.

Adaptable and Inclusive Religion

Besides having a new deity who loves all, Christianity was more open and inclusive to offer its religious rituals to all people. This view is supported by Elizabeth Clark in that the success of Christianity is due to Christian flexible ways of worship catering to different types of people. Even though Christianity developed similar religious

³⁹ Matthew 9:11, 19 (NASB).

⁴⁰ Kurt Aland, *A History of Christianity*, vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to the Threshold of the Reformation*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 34.

practitioners with philosophical sects and other groups, Clark claims that Christianity “allowed for different degrees of Christian devotion.”⁴¹ Then she adds, “So, Christianity could adjust itself to different types of people” from the highest class of intellectuals to the common people; the church writers always remind the theologians that Christ died for the lowly, as well as for the educated.”⁴² The flexible rules and the availability of different ways of worship were also central for the rapid growth and spread of Christianity. For instance, Paul eased the Jewish laws of food and circumcision, and attracted more non-Jewish converts to Christianity. Christian inclusion was noticed by others as one of Christianity’s characteristics and it disturbed other religions who promoted exclusion, such as the cult of philosophers. Kurt Aland claims that Celsus, the most significant anti-Christian polemicist of the second century, attacked Christianity for its inclusion of the outcast of the society. He quotes Celsus’ offense as stated in the *Alethes Logos*, “Every other religion accepts only honorable people, educated, irreproachable, but Christians passionately seek the dregs of the society, as if God were the head of a band of thieves who assembles criminals around himself, and as if it were something terrible to have committed no sin.”⁴³ It seems from Celsus’ argument that the sects of philosophers were exclusion cults because of the nature of their gods. Christianity was open to all people, including the sinners, because God’s love for all people and his salvation is for all humanity whose souls were equally important and precious to God. Riley states that,

one of the most noteworthy points of genius of the Christian message was the real recognition and application of the principle of equality of souls; that is, nothing having to do with the body or the material world—neither

⁴¹ Elizabeth Clark, interview, *Frontline*.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Aland, 36.

physical appearance, ethnicity, social distinction, nor gender—qualified one as superior or inferior in the eyes of God.⁴⁴

For Riley, the equality of the souls was Paul's argument for the inclusion of the Gentiles into Christianity. Paul claimed that Jesus called him to bring the gospel of the kingdom of God to the Gentiles, including equality in his kingdom. Paul extended the Jesus movement to include the Gentiles though this idea was one of the most controversial of the early church. However, Paul believed that that Jesus had ushered in the messianic age which offered light to the gentiles.

Accessible and Affordable (Free) Religion

One of the advantages of Christianity against other religions in the empire was the accessibility of sacred texts to the adherents to learn about God and their ancestors' spirituality and the affordability of religious rituals for every person. Fredriksen observes that the spread of Christianity could not happen if it were not for the translation of the Jewish Bible into Greek and for Diaspora Jewish communities worshipping in synagogues.⁴⁵ For Fredriksen, the availability of the Bible in the language familiar to adherents was one of the successes of Christianity.

In addition, like Greek religions, Judaism required different degrees of sacrifices and offerings for the pious Jews. Sacrificial animals were available at the temple for the worshippers to buy and most of the time it was too costly and unaffordable for the poor to make a sacrifice. In contrast, Christianity didn't require sacrifice because they believed that Jesus fulfilled that sacrificial requirement once for all.

Furthermore, priesthood was strictly hereditary, while the apostles were called. In the temple system, priests received a tenth of all produce of the land, in addition to the

⁴⁴ Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 10.

⁴⁵ Fredriksen, interview, *Frontline*.

temple dues, a portion of sacrifices and other offerings from the adherents, while the apostles received voluntary offerings from Christians, especially the well-off. In Christianity, Christians were not required to bring animal sacrifice, tithe, or temple tax for they worshiped at homes hosted by wealthy members. Moreover, as discussed above, the initiation ritual to Greek religions, such as Salii, was very expensive, unlike Christianity's free initiation ritual of baptism. Riley clearly states the availability and affordability of Jesus' teaching to all people, especially women, children, and the masses of the empire. Riley declares, "The teachings of Jesus, on the other hand, were for everyone, but especially for those who could not afford initiations and were uneducated in philosophy. They were for the vast majority of the people in the lowest classes."⁴⁶ Jesus' teachings were free to all people and that was so appealing for the masses to convert to Christianity.

New Messiah

Christians were assertively convinced that Jesus was the Jews' expected Messiah. As discussed above, this messianic hope was a later development in the Jewish circle, probably in the time of the second temple. Fredriksen posits that the Jewish people joined Christianity because Christianity was a "particular articulation of Jewish religious hope seen through this one figure of a redeemer [Jesus]."⁴⁷ Drawn from the messianic hope in the Old Testament, Jesus' followers claimed that Jesus was the Messiah that the Jewish people had been long waiting for. Christians had inspired that belief and it became the foundational message of the early church.⁴⁸ As Easton claims, "At the beginning most of the Jewish beliefs were simply retained, with differences only in emphasis. The basic

⁴⁶ Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 93.

⁴⁷ Fredriksen, interview, *Frontline*.

⁴⁸ John 1:41; 4:29; Matthew 16:16; Acts 5:42 (NASB).

new fact naturally was the conception of the Messiah, for the Christians knew who the Messiah was, Jesus of Nazareth. . . . As Jesus was God's Messiah, the teaching of Jesus was inspired by God."⁴⁹ While Jews had been waiting, Christians boldly claimed that they knew the Messiah and he was finally here. However, early Christians made a dramatic claim that Jesus was not only the Messiah of Jewish people, but for all people in the world. Riley makes it more convincing by claiming that no one or religion had made that claim of a universal savior. He maintains that "there had never been in the past a savior of the whole world, and no prophets of any culture had envisioned such a savior."⁵⁰ This is possibly one of the most appealing factors for Christianity, especially for non-Jews.

New Identity

Image of God

About the first century, Jewish people believed that their covenantal relationship with God had threatened. Early Jewish Christianity has also responded to this identity crisis by claiming that the new Israel was defined not in one's ancestral blood but in one's relationship with God in Christ Jesus. In addition, Christianity proclaimed that humanity was made in the image and likeness of God and that was another advantage of Christianity over other religions in the empire. The author of the Book of Genesis states that, although man was formed out of dust, he was made in the very image and likeness of God. Hence, human beings, both male and female, have the spirit of God and his likeness.⁵¹ In contrast, in the Greco-Roman creation story, human beings are not made in the image of the gods, but from the ashes of the Titans and obtained their souls from

⁴⁹ Easton, 195.

⁵⁰ Riley, *River of God*, 171.

⁵¹ Genesis 1:26-27 (NASB).

Dionysus. As Riley states, “Humans were thus a mixture of the divine and earthly: they bore the ‘Titanic nature’ in their bodies, but derived their souls from the ingested Dionysus.”⁵² Nevertheless, Paul adds that man is not only the image, but also the “glory of God.”⁵³ In Greek religion, human beings were not the image or glory of gods, such as in Christianity; however, they were at the very bottom of creation. In contrast, Christianity proclaimed that human beings were the highest of all creation. As Pagels expresses it thoroughly:

This religion [Christianity] is saying that every person, man, woman, child, slave, barbarian, no matter who, is made in the image of God and is therefore of enormous value in the eyes of God. . . . That’s an extraordinary message. And it would have been enormous news to many people who never saw their lives having value. I think that is a powerful appeal to this religion. . . . The Christian movement seemed to convey a sense of human worth in two ways. Both by the story of Jesus and his simplicity and humility And also in the story of creation; it conveys royal status on every person⁵⁴

Christianity taught a new and a hopeful message that all people were created in the likeness of God and so everyone has the same status, a royal rank, in God’s social order. Additionally, Horsley puts this notion together and relates it to the message of the kingdom. He says, “By means of the preaching of the kingdom, people who had likely been discouraged or in despair about their situation were given ‘a new lease on life.’ Especially importantly, surely, were a sense of hope and an unprecedented sense of their own worth.”⁵⁵ In Jesus, as claimed by Christianity, every person has unique self-worth because of his/her new relationship with God. As Samuel Dickey declares,

He [Jesus] unified and socialized morality, centering it consciously on the welfare of society as a whole, which he affirmed to be the inviolate family

⁵² Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 128.

⁵³ 1 Corinthians 11:7 (NASB).

⁵⁴ Pagels, interview, *Frontline*.

⁵⁵ Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement*, 126.

of God. He elevated man [woman] to kinship with Deity, focusing the divine image of the Old Testament into the incomparable sonship of the New. He enthroned in human ethics the principles of love, mutual service, and vicarious sacrifice, and traced them back to their foundation in the nature of God.⁵⁶

Unlike other religions, Christians believed and taught that every single person was created in the image and the very likeness of God. Again in Jesus, all people do not only share the same image of God but they are adopted into the family of God as sons and daughters, like Jesus. No other religions in the Roman Empire made that claim besides Christianity.

Children of God

Dissimilar to Judaism, Greek and Roman religions, Christianity plainly taught that people could become children of God through Jesus Christ. The Olympian gods were like an extended family though an exclusive culture of their own and not for all. No other religions or gods taught that everyone can become divine and become one of them. Christianity taught that all people could be adopted or authorized into the family of God if they believe in Jesus and obey his teachings. The Gospel of John clearly states, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”⁵⁷ Jesus claims that he has the power and the authority to give this gift of adoption of all believers to become children of God now and at the eschaton.⁵⁸ To become children of God one does not require making a sacrifice, or any religious rituals, but just believing in Jesus’ name. Though similar to John, Paul expands the believers’ position in

⁵⁶ Samuel Dickey, “The Originality of Jesus,” in *An Outline of Christianity: The Story of Our Civilization*, vol. 1, *The Birth of Christianity*, ed. Ernest Findlay Scott and Burton Scott Easton (New York: Bethlehem Publishers, 1926), 50.

⁵⁷ John 1:12 (NRSV).

⁵⁸ 1 John 3:1-2,10; 5:2 (NRSV).

Christ from being a son of God to be co-heirs with Christ in God's kingdom. Paul affirms to the Galatians that a son is also an heir with Christ through God in his kingdom.⁵⁹ Stark concludes his work by claiming that "finally, what Christianity gave to its converts was nothing less than humanity. In this sense virtue was its own reward."⁶⁰ Riley expresses it well, which deserves an extended quote:

But the radical new sense of the close bond between God and Son of God does not stop with Jesus. It is basic to Jesus' religious mission to give to all his followers what he himself is and has, in effect to democratize his special status . . . and the basis of the appeal of the message about Jesus—everyone who followed him would become children of God in the special way that he was So, Jesus taught his followers to pray 'Our Father,' and Paul taught that God had sent his Spirit into them to adopt them as children, that they too could call out to God, *Abba*—'Daddy.'⁶¹

Christianity taught that all Christians would become children of God and share equal status with Jesus in the kingdom of God. Thus, through Christ Christians are brothers and sisters and they become the family of God. Christianity brought new hope that all people can become children of God and closely related to one another. In other words, God's family and his kingdom were not exclusive but inclusive to all people of all nations. Therefore, to be with God, the human mortal body will be changed to be immortal, better than the Olympian gods, or Greek and Romans gods. This was good news of hope for all people including Jews and Greeks because there was nothing like that in their traditional religions.

Martyrs as Heroes and Heroines

For the Greek, heroes and heroines were known as children of the gods with mortal mothers. They were demigods, immortal, for they were superior to mere human

⁵⁹ Galatians 4:1,7,30 (NRSV).

⁶⁰ Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 215.

⁶¹ Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 79.

beings in power and wisdom. Drawn from both Christian and Greek traditions, some Christians were not afraid to die for their faith because their souls lived on and that was the basis for martyrdom. This is probably the philosophy of persecution for Tertullian, a second century church father, who once wrote, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.”⁶² How did the blood of helpless poor, viewed by many as cowards, become the source of Christianity and admired as heroes? Riley makes an interesting argument that “the early Christians brought new meaning to the word ‘martyr.’⁶³ Martyr basically meant witness, but by Christians volunteering to be killed, even brutally, then the meaning changed to indicate one who was killed because of his/her courageous testimony as a follower of Jesus Christ. Riley argues that Christian martyrdom was like a new force that inspired the masses of the Greco-Roman world to convert because “the very culture was founded on them [tales of the heroes], and the people lived and died imitating them.”⁶⁴ Fredriksen states that the “Martyrdom of Perpetua” in the year 202 or 203 is preserved by her community as a hero tale and a role model.⁶⁵ Fredriksen claims, “What we have concluding the diary is a description by somebody who is presenting a hero tale. . . . So Perpetua is really being preserved by her community as a role model. She marks off the heroic limit against which other Christians can measure themselves.”⁶⁶ Though Christians had a long battle against Roman emperors’ persecutions, Christianity succeeded and became legalized and later became the state religion of the empire because Christians preserved the martyrs’ story as a role model of faith and witnessing for their faith.

⁶² Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 50.

⁶³ Μάρτυριον is basically means “a testimony, witness, or proof.”

⁶⁴ Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 14.

⁶⁵ Fredriksen, interview, *Frontline*.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Furthermore, Riley claims that martyrdom is the pattern of the life of the heroes, which was well known in the Greco-Roman world familiar with Jesus and his followers. He also adds that the life of Jesus had followed this hero tale pattern and he also commanded his followers to imitate his life, the life pattern of a hero, and his death. That is what Mark, the gospel to the Gentiles, intends, "He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."⁶⁷ Fearlessly being martyred meant following Jesus' life pattern, a role model for a true follower, and by doing so one would not lose his/her life but regain it. For Riley, this is the energy that inspired the disciples to courageously proclaim and imitate the life and death of Jesus. He says, "This was what inspired the disciples of Jesus to imitate him and bring his gospel to the Roman Empire, and what inspired the poor of the empire to leave their traditional religions and turn to Christianity."⁶⁸ Martyrs were not only role models of the authentic followers of Jesus, but also admired and imitated as heroes and sons of God like the Greek tales of heroes. Being a martyr also meant becoming a child of God. Christians brought a new meaning to being martyred, not only imitating the pattern of Jesus' life and death but also, for Greeks, becoming a hero and a son of God. Christianity brought new hope for all Christians that if they died for Christ they saved their lives and became sons of God and shared with Christ his glory in God's kingdom. It is a message of hope exclusively for all believers. Riley states,

In the old stories, humans were unworthy failures; almost no one had a chance at the eternal life of the gods. The uneducated, the unphilosophical,

⁶⁷ Mark 8:34-35 (NRSV).

⁶⁸ Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 30.

the lowest classes, the wrong ethnicity—these had never before been given any chance at all at eternal life. No one but the very children of the gods, or at least their special favorites, garnered the attention of the divine world.⁶⁹

Christians, both Greeks and non-Greeks, saw similarities between Christianity's concept of becoming children of God and heroes of Greek mythology. In contrast to Judaism, for Christians, martyrs were heroes and heroines, children of God, and immortals; and unlike Greek religion, all persons could become heroes and children of God. The new identity is to become a hero, a role model, and a son of God, co-heirs with Christ, sharing his eternal glory.

Section 2: A Better Way to Die

Christianity brought into the Greco-Roman world a message of hope that all people could have a better way to die, so many people left their long time traditional religion and gods to convert to it. This included a burial place, resurrection, and afterlife.

Most poor people or wanderers in the Greco-Roman world might not have a family graveyard. Thus, they had no place to bury their loved ones. Matthew obviously states that the priests used Judas' blood money of thirty silver coins that he returned to buy "the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers."⁷⁰ In *Augustus to Constantine*, Robert M. Grant states that Tertullian believed that the "support and burial of the poor" was one of the Christian ways of life.⁷¹ As in Greek religion, proper burial was important; however, Christians probably did better in supporting the poor for an assured place of burial.

⁶⁹ Riley, *River of God*, 180.

⁷⁰ Matthew 27:7 (NASB).

⁷¹ Robert M. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine: The Rise and Triumph of Christianity in the Roman World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 259.

Christianity emphasized the superiority of soul over physical body and this notion was greatly evident in martyrdom tales. Christians would rather be devoured by beasts and be faithful than have a proper burial and be unfaithful. Riley claims that “the dualism of body and soul is the single most important foundation on which Christianity is based; indeed, without it, Christianity would not exist. . . . Here lies one of the greatest differences between Christianity and the religion of the Old Testament.”⁷² For Riley, this is the Christian’s basic argument for resurrection and afterlife of the soul and possibly martyrdom also.

Resurrection

Resurrection was the foundation of the early church message. Although Jesus often referred to the Old Testament, the term resurrection and its notion are not discussed in it. However, only in the apocalyptic texts of the Old Testament such as Daniel, do we find notions of resurrection suggesting that the dead will be snatched from death, or resurrected, to experience eternal life.⁷³ Even in the time of Jesus and the writing of the New Testament texts, the idea of resurrection was still debated among the Jews, such as the Sadducees and Pharisees. In Mark 12:18-27 and its parallel, Mark states that the Sadducees still kept their traditional view as in the Old Testament that there was no resurrection, while the Pharisees argued against it. Additionally, the apostle Paul emphasized the resurrection of Jesus as the core of Christian faith and the foundation for the church. Paul argued that Jesus was the first to be resurrected from the dead, so the apocalyptic texts in the Old Testament did not apply to resurrection for Christians. Therefore, all Christians will also experience resurrection at the last day. On the other

⁷² Riley, *River of God*, 20.

⁷³ Daniel 12:2-3 (NASB).

hand, in the Gospel of John, Jesus makes a dramatic twist that resurrection could start now and not at the eschaton. Jesus affirms, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die.”⁷⁴ In differing with the Pharisees’ view of resurrection, John states that Jesus affirms that Christians may die in the sense of physical death, but they will not die in the fuller sense, in the spirit. It means that the moment people believe in Jesus they begin to experience that life of being in God’s presence, or fellowship with God immediately, which death cannot destroy. Christianity brought a very different theology of resurrection and a new hope for all people that they will experience resurrection if they just believe in Jesus to the end.

Furthermore, Burton Throckmorton Jr. states it concisely but clearly that resurrection is the “ground of life and hope of Christians . . . believers have grounds for hope”⁷⁵ In early Christianity, resurrection was one of the key doctrines and foundations of faith. Jesus’ resurrection is significant to Christianity as Paul says, “if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”⁷⁶ Moreover, G. B. Caird adds that these passages are “the ostensible basis for Christian hope in the New Testament is the resurrection of Christ.”⁷⁷ One of the advantages of early Christianity over other religions in the Greco-Roman world was the assertion of the

⁷⁴ John 11:25-26 (NASB).

⁷⁵ Burton H. Throckmorton Jr., *Jesus Christ: The Message of the Gospels, the Hope of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) .

⁷⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:13-14 NASB.

⁷⁷ G. B. Caird, “The Christological Basis of Christian Hope,” in *The Christian Hope*, Theological Collections, 13 (London: S.P.C.K., 1970), 9.

assurance of resurrection for all Christians based on nothing but Jesus' resurrection and relationship with God. As Caird declares,

The hope of eternal life rests rather on the conviction that the man Jesus enjoyed so close a relationship to God that death could not more than a brief interruption of it; and on the confidence that, because he has established a similarly close relationship with men [and women], he has opened up to them the possibility of sharing his life in God's presence.⁷⁸

The resurrection of Jesus opens the door of eternal life for all Christians that death could not touch or end. This new hope inspired many Christians in times of trials and persecution as Easton states, "The Resurrection of Jesus changed his followers from a heart-broken and discouraged group into a triumphant Church, eager to spread the message everywhere . . . it had a proud record of success, despite persecution and martyrdom."⁷⁹ Likewise, Riley states it more clearly with an intense claim that Christians overcame persecution because they understood Jesus' dualism that they have both body and soul; and the human body is inferior, for it is just a mortal matter, against the soul. Riley maintains, "The fact that the Christians overcame the persecutions of the Romans and eventually won the empire was a demonstration that Christianity had learned this lesson. Christians learned to see themselves as clay pots inhabited by eternal souls, and that by endurance to death in faithfulness to their Leader, they would win eternal life."⁸⁰ unlike traditional Judaism and Tongan religion, Christianity teaches that every single Christian will be raised from the dead into new life with God. Christians assured of resurrection with new life in the afterlife overcame physical problems, such as socio-economical and political, that they faced.

⁷⁸ Caird, 21.

⁷⁹ Easton, 173.

⁸⁰ Riley, *River of God*, 169.

Eternal Life

The concept of afterlife or eternal life was possibly the most appealing message of Christianity against other religions in the Roman Empire because it was totally new in their culture. Christianity claimed that the afterlife was the true destiny of the human soul. This teaching was totally new in Jesus' tradition and culture. As Riley points out, "In the main, Jesus' message was something different from what his contemporary Jews believed. The vast majority of people of his day, Jew or Gentile, did not believe in souls or the afterlife; yet that belief is fundamental to the message of Jesus He was preaching something new to his culture."⁸¹ In addition, this new teaching could be one of the main reasons that many people in the Greco-Roman world converted to Christianity because they understood despair as their fate. As Riley says, "But here Jesus and the Christians made a radical claim. Jesus had risen from the dead and so could anyone—now eternal life was available for all who dared to follow him to the end of their lives."⁸² As Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."⁸³ Riley understood this passage in the light of imitation of hero's tales in Greek mythology. He argues, "In this new message followers were required to join the drama as real participants, to follow the very pattern of the forerunner and become heroes themselves, with the promise that, as he had been vindicated after death, so would they."⁸⁴ Similar to Jesus in Mark, Riley claims that by following Jesus to the end, one will have eternal life

⁸¹ Riley, *River of God*, 160.

⁸² Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 93.

⁸³ Mark 8:34-35 (NRSV).

⁸⁴ Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 140.

like Jesus and the heroes of the Greek mythology. The true followers who imitated the life of Jesus will be saved, resurrected into afterlife, and become immortal like the gods and heroes. Furthermore, Riley comments on Matthew 16: 18 that Jesus promises that the gates of Hades will not be able to hold in his followers because Jesus will open the gates of Hades so that his followers will resurrect from the place of the dead. Riley states,

When the members of the Church die, they will be released from the kingdom of death and gain immortality. Their hero had himself died, gone into Hades' realm, and returned by resurrection and ascension. This same promise is held out to his followers. He had made a way through the wall, opening the gates. His disciples were but to follow him, through death into life. This is the message composed in and for the Greco-Roman world.⁸⁵

Jesus promises that even Hades, the god of death, will not be able to hold his pious followers for he already defeated Hades. Riley makes a convincing claim that not only was the concept of afterlife foreign for Jesus' contemporaries, but Peter also claimed that only Jesus has the words and teachings of eternal life. In other words, only Jesus has the authority and power to give eternal life to all people. For the masses of the Roman Empire who struggled with severe poverty, diseases and oppression, an afterlife was so appealing to them because it promised immortality, health, wealth, and timeless liberty and peace that no human tyranny could ever touch. For people who were tired of living in oppression, this Christian message is their only hope.

⁸⁵ Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 142.

CHAPTER 5

Vital Ministry for the Tongan Immigrant Church (UMC)

In this chapter, I propose two ways to deal with the impact that Tongan religion has had on the Tongan Church and how it can help the Tongan UMC to revitalize its ministry to be successful against its own traditional and cultural norms. First, the Tongan UMC has to create an egalitarian church community that develops a sense of equality and belonging in the church, and generates self-worth in the lives of every single member by serving their needs through being a health and welfare agency with an economic relief program. Second, the Tongan UMC has to develop more economical and constructive ways of doing *misinale* (annual giving to the church) that foster egalitarianism and wealth distribution among the church's members and the community.

New Church Community

Egalitarian Community

There is a great chance for the immigrant Tongans to create an egalitarian church community in the UMC because of the democratic nature of the church and state. However, change must come from the clergy for they are respected, like chiefs, as spiritual leaders of the church and community.

First, clergy should advise congregations to discontinue addressing them in chiefly dialect but in commoner's language. Clergy should humbly and civilly respond that they are not a secular chief but a spiritual leader and servant of God and the church. By this, congregations would feel personally related to the clergy for there is no hierarchical barrier between them. Clergy must meet with adherents and all people on common ground. Paul urges Christians to have the attitude that Christ Jesus had, in that

he humbled his equal status with God and took the form of a human being and even a bond-servant in order to relate to humanity. By this, God has exalted Christ Jesus more highly than any human beings. In other words, God relates to humanity in Jesus and communicates to all people directly in human language. Therefore, clergy should imitate Christ Jesus and live a humble life of a servant; then God, not people, would exalt them for imitating Christ Jesus.

Second, clergy must cease the election of chiefly-rep among church members for it creates tension and barriers in the church community about status—who has the closest blood relation to the king/chiefs. It also suspends the seating order in the sanctuary for there is no chief-rep. However, if a chief should visit from Tonga, then the clergy and the congregation should give him due respect following Tongan custom. But terminating these two traditional practices, chiefly dialect for clergy and election of chiefly-rep, would also withdraw the tendency for hierarchical addressing in every church gatherings. This, I believe, will foster equality among church members which could lead to the community at large. In order for the church to be an egalitarian community, these cultural and hierarchical barriers must be withdrawn from the church community.

Finally, clergy should occasionally serve the congregation instead of always being honored and served at the front table in the church's and community's social occasions. I was moved to see the bishop serving a meal for the homeless people, and the district superintendent standing in line with others at the conference to receive food. On special Sundays, such as Children's, Mother's and Father's Sundays, clergy should honor them at the front table, if they have a feast. Once in a while, at the beginning of my church service, I will serve my leaders, congregation, and visitors as a way of relating and

appreciating their ministry as fellow ministers in Christ. Sometimes Jesus gave up his place of honor at the front table to serve his disciples and others; the most memorable being the Last Supper. Jesus took a towel and a bowl of water to wash his disciples' dirty feet and commanded them to serve one another as he served them. To be followers of Christ, clergy should serve others too. By doing so, the church will be a place that people feel/sense that they belong to and love to be.

By practicing these three suggestions, I am convinced it will foster equality among the members of congregations, develop a sense of belonging in the church, and generate a sense of self-worth in their lives. Above all, these changes possibly will rekindle and advance brotherly/sisterly love among the church community.

Health Agency

The majority of Tongan immigrants live around the church community. The Tongan immigrant church, like the early Church, plays a significant role in the lives of the immigrants because the church assumes the place of the village/community in the homeland. Though in different a manner, clergy also assumes the leadership role of the chief in the village. Thus, clergy should act as community advocates due to the language and cultural barriers in the U.S., which have a considerable impact on the lives of the Tongans, especially in economics and health. I have attended several funerals of people who did not seek medical help because of communication barriers, or of having no insurance, and they were ashamed to ask for help. Therefore, the clergy and the church should provide, or work with non-profit organizations to provide, necessary health tests and treatments for commonly experienced health concerns within the Pacific Islander

community: hypertension, diabetes, high cholesterol, heart disease, gout, mammogram, pap smear, and dental care.

Sometime this summer, I will schedule a Church Clinic Day with the Tongan Community Service Center (TCSC) for Saturdays and Sundays for a month from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Hopefully within this time span people will receive their test results and I will work with the TCSC with its supporting agencies to help out in paying or finding funds for medications and treatments. Moreover, I will also work with TCSC's employees and/or sponsor professionals to educate the Tongan community about health behavior in ways to prevent and/or maintain health against these diseases, as well as informing them of governmental benefits. After providing the health tests, a nutritionist and a fitness trainer will be sponsored to educate the Tongan community about healthy diet and exercise. Health resources will also be provided in the Tongan language for participants. Additionally, I will also program morning walk devotions on Saturday morning starting from this summer on at the nearby park. Participants will meet at the park at 7 a.m. for a fifteen-minute devotion, and then walk for about three miles reflecting on the devotional material. Then, we will meet again at the park for sharing and then close with prayers.

I believe that these programs will promote a healthy Tongan church community. Typically, Tongan churches primarily focus on spiritual and religious matters and less on physical health because it is a personal issue. Jesus cared for both physical and spiritual needs and welfare of the people. Therefore, clergy and the church should care for the wellbeing of its members' and the community as well.

Welfare Agency

The Tongan UMC could be a crucial welfare and economic relief agency for the immigrant church, like the early Christian church. I propose these means as ways for the Tongan church to help its low income members financially.

First, the clergy and the church should cease fundraising from the homeland church for three years, at least as a start, especially for church buildings and unnecessary items. To illustrate, a typical Tongan church of about hundred and fifty members can donate up to a hundred thousand dollars a year to fundraisers from Tonga primarily for church buildings. This fund could be saved by families each year for three years as economic relief for church families to improve their standard of living, such as moving from living in a motel to an apartment, buy health, dental, and life insurances, and to further children's education. Furthermore, most Tongan students leave school after high school or college without degrees in order to work and help their families financially. This proposed savings plan could help out the families so that their children could continue their education and/or to help pay for their education. In addition, besides school financial aid, I will also work with TCSC to provide academic financial aid resources and application for Tongan students.

Second, the clergy and the church could ease excessive and unhealthy *fakaafe* (feasts). The Tongan church usually has about twenty *fakaafe* (feasts) a year besides *misinale*. For instance, there are approximately eleven *fakaafe* (feasts) in the Week of Prayer, the first week of the year: on the first Sunday of the year, and twice a day, morning and evening, from Monday through Friday. Customarily, one family would have to prepare a (*fakaafe*) feast for the whole church. For instance, for a small church of about

fifty adherents, a family could spend more than a thousand dollars for the *fakaafe*. If the clergy and the church reduce *fakaafe* (feast) into one potluck at the conclusion of the Week of Prayer, each family could possibly spend a hundred dollars per potluck and save about a thousand dollars for family use or to support the church's ministry.

In addition, the clergy also should encourage church members, instead of making *fakaafe* (feast) for the whole church, to share food or money with needy families, homeless people, or charity. Instead of giving to the well-off members, give the food and/or money proportionately to those who need it the most. The early Christians habitually shared their food and wealth with others according to their needs. Sometimes they raised funds to support the needs of other church's members. To put this idea into practice, this Thanksgiving, I will work with church members to donate turkeys and share them with other members and the community. Moreover, before Christmas, I will schedule gift exchanges among church members and share some with homeless children.

Third, fasting is a good practice for spiritual discipline but it also profits members' healthily and economically. It is a customary practice for the Tongan church to fast on Friday. The clergy and the church should support fasting but ask each member to donate at least a monetary equivalent of two meals that they skipped in fasting as a relief fund for the needy members and homeless people in the community. For instance, a small church of thirty adult members could raise about fifteen thousand dollars a year, based on five dollars per meal for each member per Friday, as a fund for needy members and homeless people in the community.

Fourth, job training is crucial for the Tongan church's ministry because of the lack of trade training, language and cultural barriers. The majority of men are working as

contractors, especially in concrete, masonry, and landscaping, or in construction.

However, only a few of these contractors are licensed for the trades they are practicing because they are educationally incapable of passing the state license exam. On the other hand, the majority of Tongan women are working as care providers for elderly people, either privately hired or employed through a non-Tongan agency.

This summer, I will take a state license exam for general building contractor so that I can help unlicensed contractors in the Tongan community. This winter, I will team up with other licensed contractors to provide training for a contractor's license so that the unlicensed contractors can pass the exam and license. By this means, more contractors are able to bid for a higher contract and/or expand their business from homeowner noncommercial to commercial contracts. At the same time, staff from TCSC and Tongan American Health Professionals Association (TAHPA) will train women in CPR and medical skills as well as vocabulary useful for care a provider.

Furthermore, many of these blue collar workers, men and women, are not fluent in English, speaking and reading. In the summer, I will work with our college students and volunteers from an English speaking congregation to provide an English class, especially with language usage that is relevant to these blue collar jobs. This ESL class will be held every Saturday morning from 10 a.m. to 12 noon, every summer. Certainly, all these kinds of training will benefit the Tongan community and church members and, in return, the ministry of the church.

New Ways of *Misinale*

Economic *Misinale*

I propose two ways that could practically revitalize this traditional means of doing *misinale*. First, continue the way of doing *misinale*, such as giving in a family or class meeting, but discontinue playful entertainment and announcement of the donors' name and offerings' amount, and cease the costly feast at the *misinale*. The clergy should preach to the congregation that *misinale*, giving to the Lord, is an act of worship, and should be expressed in gratitude for God's providence. Therefore, each family or class meeting may still come to the front of the congregations and present their offerings as usual, sharing words of dedication, but the amount is not to be announced. Moreover, clergy should cease the publicizing of donors and the amount of offerings to the church. However, at the conclusion of *misinale*, then the total amount raised by all members would be announced. Additionally, clergy should end costly feasts, which could save thousands of dollars for church members to use for their families' greater purpose or for another useful ministry. For instance, a family could save the money for feasts and use it to buy a laptop for a student, or donate that money to the church as an economic relief fund for low income members and/or to feed homeless people. During the two years of my first appointment as clergy, I successfully convinced my congregation to cease the announcement of individual giving and feast provisions. Though it is not easy, I will continue to do so and convince my fellow clergy to modify *misinale* into a more economical and constructive custom for the church and the community.

Pledge

As mentioned above, to put an end to *misinale*, and change to pledging as in the UMC, clergy has to lead the way. Pledging would take out competitive elements of giving, such as announcement of donor's names and amount of offerings, and costly feast. In pledging, each member privately writes an estimated amount of annual offering and hands it to the treasurer, and then donates a portion in each Sunday's offering in an envelope provided by the church. Then the counters privately count the offerings. Afterward, the treasurer updates privately by mailing the tally of total offerings to each member. If the promised amount is not reached at the end of the year, the treasurer or the church does not demand it. There is no publicizing of the donors' names or the amount of their offerings. This could also take away competitive giving, which often leads to hierarchical barriers, and unnecessary costly feasts at the *misinale* that impoverish members of the church and community. A few times in the past before being appointed as clergy I promoted the benefit of changing to pledging, but the majority still favored the traditional *misinale*.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

Throughout this project, it is very clear how the Tongan ancient religion and the understanding of gods had impacted Tongan culture and the Church leading to these three main problems like stratification, compulsory worship and obligatory giving. In this project, I posit that the addressing of these three main problems would help to revitalize our ministry into a more vibrant church, especially for the immigrants. Based on this research and personal experience, the Tongan UMC, even the Tongan Church, has failed to evolve with time and the new understanding of God and also adapt to the new culture overseas. The Tongan UMC, and Tongan immigrant churches, should challenge Tongans to embrace a new worldview, a new conception of reality they live on, indeed to accept a new understanding of God. The Tongan UMC is still rooted with the home Church into its tradition and culture embedded in the ancient theological understanding of gods and human duties to the gods and superiors. I posit that the primarily reason that these traditional understandings and practices have been prolonged until now is because the Tongan mainline churches, especially the FWCT and UMC, has often been the loyal defender and supporter of the status quo. In a recent study, *The State and the Church, the State of the Church in Tonga*, Heneli T. Niumeitolu, a FWCT clergy, states

The Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga [FWCT] has remained very much under the mound of Tongan demeanor as represented by the monarch and chiefs since the beginning of the Wesleyan Mission in 1826. This chiefly influence persists because the solid hierarchical arrangement of Tongan society, rooted in the traditional religion, carries on even though Tonga has regarded as a Christian country for nearly two hundred years. . . . the

chiefs have always been controlling the spirituality of the people . . . both politics and religion.¹

As a result, stratification is still occurs in the FWCT and Tongan UMC with new class added to the existing social ranks based on achievements and wealth leading to compulsory *misinale* (annual giving to the church) and *fakaafe/feilaulau* (feast and/or gift of money to the church/clergy) not only as a way worship and mark of faithful adherent, but also in order to be respected in the community and at church.

The intention of this project is to search the early Christianity and how did it succeed against the Greco-Roman religions, society, and culture to become a vibrant church. This research is focused on the early Christians understanding of God, worship and spirituality, and their relationship to others within and without their community. By studying these factors that lead to the success of the early church could bring hope to the Tongan UMC to address these three problems and revitalize its ministry to be a more vibrant ministry.

For example, the ancient Tongans believed in many gods whose community is restricted among themselves. No other god outside their family or humanity is allowed into their divine community. Though each lived in their own family community, the gods ruled hierarchically according to their overall power and functions. This theological understanding of gods and their community shaped the Tongan society and Church community. On the other hand, Christians teach that they worship a God of love who welcomes all people to be part of God's family. It is an egalitarian community derived from the relationship of this triune God. Therefore, by emphasizing and teaching the

¹ Heneli T. Niumeitolu, "The State and the Church: The State of the Church in Tonga" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2007), 259.

Trinity, the Tongan UMC could change its traditional culture to an open community and egalitarian community for all people. I believe that through the teaching of the Trinity and the nature of its divine communion we would reconsider our hierarchical culture in the Church to be an egalitarian community.

Yet another, this theological understanding of gods led to the notion that the commoners had no souls, only the king and the chiefs, so their primary responsibility was to worship and make sacrifices to the gods, and serve the king, and the chiefs. Consequently, the worship and sacrifices included *'inasi* (offering of the first-fruits) was a compulsory duty which was connected to the rewards and prosperity for the king, the chiefs, and the land's fertility. These beliefs caused the king and the chiefs to enforce the commoners' duty leading the adherents to give, even up to the edge of impoverishment as evident at the *'inasi* (offering of the first-fruits to the king/chiefs) festival, *misinale* (annual giving to the church) and *fakaafe/feilaulau* (feast and/or gift of money to the church/clergy). Though *'inasi* (offering of the first-fruits to the king) is not celebrated like in the ancient time, Tongans preserve this festival in other forms even overseas, especially giving of raw food and/or money to the clergy or preparing feasts for the Church as *fakaafe/feilaulau* (feast and/or gift of money to the church/clergy). Because all people is created equal in the image of God and Christ had sacrificed his own life for all people of the world, Christians are not required to make sacrifices or obligated to give, but to worship freely and give cheerfully and proportionately to one's financial ability.

Another example of, this theological understanding of gods led to legitimate the social order and the requirements for the commoners to serve the superior and not the other way around or each other. The *'inasi* is the offering of the first-fruits to the king—

the sacred and temporal ruler of the land. Likewise, *polopolo* is the offering of the first-fruit of yams and other produces of the land to the chiefs—the reps of the king and landlords of the villages. Afterward, clergy also receive *polopolo* and other food crops, and most recently in similar manner as *fakaafe* (especially raw food and/or money)—the anointed rep of God and spiritual leaders. Consequently, church members habitually give to their superior and barely to one another or to the people in need. Jesus teaches that to be great and first in his community, one must become a servant to others, and not rule over them. The Christian community is a community of equal status, and not lord over others, but servant of all. The UMC should create a community that serve one another's needs accordingly and provide social support for the homeless people.

Therefore, I am convinced that the Tongan Church and the Tongan UMC must challenge the old system and respond to the needs of the people in the new culture and adapt to it. As Riley concludes his *River of God* with this significant and relevant argument not only to Christian Church today, but mostly to the Tongan UMC by saying, “New circumstances and new science bring new revelation and corresponding religious understanding. What is old is challenged and must respond. What we know of God today is again being challenged and forced to respond.”² Though the voice of the Tongan Church is hushed possibly by its culture and the direct involvement of the king (state), the Church must be a church to raise its prophetic voice and challenge this unfavorable impact of culture and state in the Church in order to be the true body of Christ and the voice of God. In his book, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, Craig A. Carter concludes his argument by saying that

² Riley, *River of God*, 237.

A worldly church simply says 'me too' to the highest and best wisdom and becomes a culture-religion. The world needs the church to be the church so that the world can know that God loves the world and that redemption is therefore possible. The church is the sign of hope in the world, but if it does not remain distinct from the world it loses its ability to point to the transcendent God.³

The Church must speak against this disparaging culture in the Tongan Church and injustice in the society. It must proclaim the gospel of hope to the commoners that there is hope in this life and in the afterlife. The Church must remain true to be the body of Christ in this world by embodying God's unconditional love and hope to all people. Hope that there is equality and egalitarian in God's holy church and in his kingdom to come. Hope that the Tongan Church and the Tongan UMC serves the needs of the people of God with and without its community.

In this project, I am strongly convinced that in order for the Tongan Church, in Tonga and in America, to be effective in its ministry and become a vibrant church, the Tongan Church must rethink this theological implication of the ancient religion and adapt with newer understanding of Trinity to create an egalitarian community that generate love toward God that embody in love to all people within and beyond Tongan community. This is the gospel of hope for the Tongan Church both in Tonga and overseas.

³ Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 199.

Appendixes

Appendix A: Trinity: Paradigm for Egalitarian/Christian Community

Tongan churches should reconsider their traditional understanding of God that is hierarchically reflected in the social order and the structure of the Tongan Church, and provide insight based on Trinitarianism and egalitarianism, expressed in the New Testament as being the Church's culture and paradigm for social community. This theology and spirituality will help to rethink the traditional concept of God and the church's way of worship and ministry. Include in this discussion: How many (three-persons or gods) coexist and are coequal in one Godhead? Or how does the notion of Trinity (three-in-unity and unity-in-three) work? How does the understanding of unity of the body of Christ and unity of the Spirit address the problem of stratification in the Tongan church? The early Christians understood Trinity in relational terms, of the interrelationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and their relation to humanity for different reasons. This divine interrelationship should be a paradigm for Christian community, a glimpse of what God intends for the whole world.

Unity of the Body of Christ

The analogy of the body of Christ is possibly the most important metaphor in the New Testament for the community of Christians. It is not only a metaphor for a fellowship of mutuality bound together through Christ but also an image of a living organism. The church is a fellowship of Christians who share the life of Christ with each other. Jesus, at the Last Supper, shared the bread with his disciples as a symbol of his body broken for them and for many (church). Jesus also commanded them to share his body (bread) as a symbol of his ongoing presence in the Christian community. Since then Christians gathered to celebrate not only the unending presence of Christ in the church but also their oneness and relationality in the body of Christ. Through the body of Christ, all Christians are one with Christ, in his life, death and resurrection, and one with each other in ministry and the kingdom of God. In other words, every Christian should have equal status in the body of Christ, the church, as in the kingdom of God.

In the New Testament, predominantly in the Pauline corpus, Paul addressed disunity in the early church simply with the analogy of the church as the (human) body of Christ. In I Corinthians 12, Paul reassures all Corinthian Christians that they are equal members of the body of Christ, though each member has a different function and each function is for the benefit of all members of one whole body.¹ Then Paul lists the church's leadership in sequence according to each function for the community of faith, such as in the body. However, Paul does not intend to show that there should be a hierarchical ranking of offices in the church. For Paul, these leadership roles or offices are nothing but forms of service to the whole community. Contrary to the Greco-Roman hierarchical system, Paul emphasizes the importance of each member's role and the interdependence of all members of the body for the mutual benefit of all and the whole body. Paul also brings social and political status into his discussion of the analogy of the body: that in the body of Christ, the church, there is neither Jew nor Greek, free nor

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:4-34; Romans 12:2-8

slave.² Though every single Christian has different gifts from the Spirit, there is no physical or social status or hierarchical order in the community of faith. For example, clergy and sexton are equally important for the life and ministry of the church.

Likewise, the writer of Ephesians 4 discusses unity in diversity in the church at Ephesus. Each and every one is called and equipped with different spiritual gifts “for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith . . . joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.”³ The sole purpose of the diversity of spiritual gifts is for the wholeness of the body. The success and completion of the ministry of the church is due to its diverse gifts. In other words, Christian unity is enriched by the diversity of spiritual gifts. Christian unity is enriched by the diversity of spiritual gifts.

This biblical analogy of the body doesn’t address hierarchical structure, for the apostle begins and ends with love, but a truly loving and caring community of faith that self-sacrifices for the mutual benefit of the whole body.

Unity in Spirit

In the analogy of the church as the body of Christ, the Spirit is the source of empowerment and giver of all spiritual gifts, and is the basis for their unity. In other words, without the Spirit, there is no unity in the church for the Spirit is the sole source of empowerment for unity. In addition, Paul claims that “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”⁴ For Paul, the Spirit also gives Christians the gift of adoption into the family of God. As God sent the Holy Spirit into his Son, Jesus, God also sent it to all God’s children. Therefore, all believers are brothers and sisters through the Spirit. God shares divine communion and relationship with all people through the Spirit. The true nature of the Church is to share equality and community with every single member. In Acts 2, Christians placed everything in common and they were able to minimize poverty among them far better than any community in the Greco-Roman world.

The communion of God is opened to every single person regardless of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic and sociopolitical status. This is the theology that needs to be preached, taught, and implemented in the Tongan Church: that God invites all people into God’s kingdom, an egalitarian community for all nations. Therefore, the Tongan Church should invite all people into the egalitarian community of faith to share and experience God’s divine communion here on earth, similar to Jesus’ final prayer for his disciples and the church “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us . . .”⁵ Every single believer as well as the church as a whole should participate in the community of the Trinity and share their life in order for the church to be in unity.

Therefore, the Trinity is the ideal for the Tongan church community, so that each member should live in harmony with one another, despite one’s socioeconomic and political status, for the mutual benefit of all people. In this divine communion, there is no barrier of physical and psychological hierarchies in the Church. If the world wanted to

² 1 Corinthians 12:13

³ Ephesians 4:12-13 (NRSV).

⁴ Galatians 4:6 (NRSV).

⁵ John 17:20-21 (NRSV).

see where there is egalitarianism, justice, and peace then they should look at the church. If the world wanted to see where there is unconditional love, service, and charity then they should look at the church. If the Tongan society wanted to see where there is sociopolitical and socioeconomic equality then they should look at the Tongan church, both FWCT and UMC.

Appendix B: Christian Community

Several scholars posit that the success of the early Christianity was due to the new community they developed to exclusively serve the needs (physically first, then spiritually and psychologically) of the masses of the empire and beyond. The Tongan church must learn to follow the early church and reorganize the church community to suit the context of the immigrant church, in the UMC.

First, like the early church, the Tongan church should create an egalitarian community. The Church could be hierarchical in leadership but not in practice. As stated above, in Tongan tradition, clergy is respected in the community and the Church not only as religious and community leaders but as people who are primarily called and consecrated by God. Because of that reverence, as also reflected in the use of the chiefly dialect in addressing the clergy, some are tempted to consider their leadership roles in terms of a position of high social status. From experience, it seems that some clergy enjoy the honor of being like a chief in the community and in the Church.

The Church should be an inclusive community, with no physical boundary that pictures hierarchy, such as seating and election of chief representatives, which leads to stratification and inequality. The Church should be careful in seating or Church setting so that it could not send a mixed message about egalitarianism in the body of Christ and the kingdom of God. For instance, the church should discontinue the election of chief rep, seating order, hierarchical address in the church, but just recognize attendants, especially visitors. Moreover, the Church should openly and publically depict every single person as having equal membership and right of worship.

The UMC understands the table of Holy Communion as open to everyone with no exception, such as age, required in the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga (FWCT) and membership, as in other denominations. Representing Tongan tradition, the FWCT does not allow children and youth to partake of the elements of the Holy Communion. However, those who are permitted to receive the elements customarily line up to receive communion according to their social rank following the clergy (administering of the Communion): king, chiefs, elders, and then the rest of the congregation. On the other hand, for the UMC, the Holy Communion is an open table for all people (members, nonmembers, adults or children) and adherents could come freely and openly (but not in hierarchical social status) to receive the communion elements. Even though several Tongan immigrants are still confused about these two practices, especially coming from one denominational root (Wesleyan/Methodism), I encourage an open table not only from my theological conviction, but also as way of portraying the equality of all God's children and in the community of faith. I am preaching and teaching unity and equality as portrayed by the sacramental elements (bread and fruit of the vine). Like the Trinity, the communion bread, made of a single grain ground together into flour, is a symbol of diversity in unity of the members of the Church. It is a symbol of the Church as a

gathering of diverse people with different socioeconomic and political status, who sacrifice their differences, and unite in an intimate relationship with one another in/through the body and blood of Christ.

Inevitably, the Church is a society of adherents in which leaders have a hierarchical leadership role. Like the masses in the Greco-Roman world, Tongan people have an anxious experience with the Church authority and governmental leadership. On account of traditional theology and culture, Tongan commoners were taught both at home and church to respect and obey the clergy regardless of their actions, for they were called and consecrated by God. It is a similar idea with children to parents, especially their father. If they judge or criticize the clergy they (and not only they but possibly their children) could suffer misfortune or death.

I think another weakness of the Tongan Church derived from traditional theological understanding of gods is autocracy. This mode of leadership opens the door for autocracy in the Church, and not democracy, leading to ineffective ministry, and factionalism, as seen in most Tongan Churches in the homeland and abroad. As Church and organizational leadership expert James M. Kouzes states, "To get extraordinary things done in an organization, leaders have to enable others to act. . . . Through that relationship [trust], leaders turn their constituents into leaders themselves."⁶ These hierarchical leaders do not comprehend that their power is related to their relationships with other leaders and congregations. Undoubtedly poor leadership in the Tongan Church is one of the foremost causes of problems in the church and community because of untrained and conservative leaders who maintain social norms and the status quo and transmit them from one generation of leaders to another.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, some Tongan clergy are tempted to consider their roles in terms of authority and connection to social rank. The challenge could be cultural as well as educational to discern authority and leadership in the church. An expert in church leadership, Lovett Weems Jr., claims,

Authority can be given; leadership must be earned. A person can be assigned, selected, or designated for a position, but a person cannot be appointed leadership. While some degree of authority comes with the assumption of a position, the right to lead must be earned. . . . The person who tries to rely on authority alone, or even primarily, will not be an effective leader. . . . The final test for all leaders is whether someone is following.⁷

However, all Tongan clergy should reconsider their pastoral leadership role consistent with Jesus' leadership and teachings, and not cultural authority. Jesus, in Mark 10:35-45, rebukes James and John for asking for a position of authority. For Jesus, the Christian and church community is not authoritative but servant to one another. By this, Jesus taught his disciples that leading is serving one another, and not being served by another. Jesus radically reorders the social status of the world for his followers. He states, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be

⁶ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 20.

⁷ Lovett H. Weems Jr. *Church Leadership: Vision, Team, Culture, and Integrity*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 3-4.

your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.”⁸ Jesus urges his followers to think of authority and leadership in relational terms, as servant. For instance, clergy is appointed in the authority of the church to provide pastoral leadership to the community of faith. Therefore, the social status of the followers of Jesus and the Church would not be based on their political, socioeconomic, and ecclesial or apostolic power, but on Christ who called them to serve one another and their neighbors. For Jesus, there is no social status in his community, for all humans are equal in love and service. It is a matter of unconditional love and caring for one another through service and not authority, position and rank. Jesus set the example in the upper room on the night of the last supper as he took a basin of water with a towel to wash his disciples’ dirty feet. Then he commanded them to do likewise to one another. If Jesus is the founder and head of the Church, the Church leadership should follow the model of servant leadership that he set and commanded us to follow. To illustrate, clergy should politely admit that they are not a chief but a clergyperson, a commoner and a servant of God called to humbly serve all people. Several Tongans and clergy are concerned about this, for it is better accept it as reverence, because of the pastoral leadership role, than improper address. However, I strongly believe that in order to promote egalitarianism in the church community, clergy should avoid this pretention and communicate with commoners in the same dialect. The sovereign God became human in Jesus of Nazareth, born in a manger, lived a simple human life, and died as a criminal in order to relate and communicate with all people in all walks of life. Paul urges the congregations in Philippi to imitate Jesus’ humble attitude for not considering his equality with God but emptying it to become human like them in order to serve humanity. Jesus broke down the barriers between God and humanity so that all people could communicate with God on a human level.

In addition to egalitarianism, the Church community should serve the needs of the adherents and generate a sense of belonging within and beyond the community. The Church is a community of love that cares for one another and promotes a sense of community and belonging. In providing social welfare and support for its members and beyond that, it is also a welfare institution or agency. Certainly, like a developing country, people in the homeland are in need of social and welfare aid because of scarcity of natural resources, unequal share of wealth, poverty, insufficient health system, and high chronic diseases. For instance, considering the success and growth of the early church, Besnier makes a similar and valid observation about the growth of Mormonism in Tonga during the 1960s. He maintains that “among other features that make the LDS Church attractive to new converts is the church’s highly organized social welfare system.”⁹ From my experience, the LDS Church is still the best in Tonga in addressing these needs. Then again, Tongan people in America, as statistics have illustrated above, for instance in southern California, are struggling with similar social welfare needs. Unfortunately, the Tongan UMC seems too focused on draining every penny from these low-income members for church construction and activities, feasts, and giving to the high and well-off people, such as chiefs and clergy, and is careless for their welfare and health needs.

The Tongan immigrant church plays a significant role in the lives of the immigrants because the church assumes the place of the village in the mother country.

⁸ Matthew 20:25-27 (NRSV).

⁹ Besnier, 212.

Pastors, like chiefs, also play a significant role as community leaders. However, pastors act as community advocates, due to the language and cultural barriers, which lead to serious impacts on the lives of the community, especially in economics and health. The Pacific Islanders, including Tongans, face health challenges, especially from obesity, hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease. These diseases are the main causes of death in the Tongan community, both in the homeland and overseas. Above all, the Tongans lag behind other ethnic groups in health because they fail to have medical exams due to the lack of health insurance, low income, and unfamiliarity with governmental aid and education about prevention of these diseases. Therefore, the Tongan Church should provide or work with other non-profit organizations to provide these necessary health tests, which are commonly considered a significant health concern within the Pacific Islander community including the Tongan: hypertension, diabetes, mammogram, pap smear, and dental care. The Church should also educate the Tongan community about health behavior in ways to prevent and/or maintain health against these diseases, as well as informing them of governmental benefits. Parts of this education are English classes (ESL) and immigration procedures for adults to promote better communication and access to governmental benefits, and after-school programs for students to stimulate higher achievement and education.

Additionally, a study of the house church in early Christianity is helpful in studying Christian community and ecclesiology in the New Testament. This ecclesiology is based on the house-church in the early church of the New Testament. The first church started in the home, of members or patrons, as a family gathering to worship and share food and Holy Communion.¹⁰ The house-church was significant to the success and spread of the early church for it was a center of worship (*ekklēsia*) and fellowship (*koinōnia*). As L. Michael White states, “Group organization and travel depended upon the hospitality of these house church owners. A number of important social conventions developed around the practice of household hospitality, which came to apply equally well to groups as to individuals.”¹¹ White also elaborates that Paul often refers to this social convention in his letters as “receiving” and “sending” or extending hospitality to his colleagues as brothers and sisters in Christ. Consequently, in the New Testament, Jesus and Paul refer to their followers as brothers (and sisters) and teach them to do the same to one another, love/accept one another like immediate family members and not distant family or relatives as translated in the Tongan Bible.¹² This closely-knit family relationship creates a spirit of oneness and community, a sense of belonging to one another and to the Church as one egalitarian body. Therefore, every church gathering is a chance to rekindle the spirit of family—closeness and sense of belonging, to one another as sisters and brothers. As low income congregations like the early church, Tongan churches should learn that everyone is needed in order for the ministry to succeed, especially in financial support. We can count on each other and the success of one

¹⁰ Acts 2-5.

¹¹ L. Michael White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*, vol. 1, *Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 106.

¹² In the Tongan Bible, especially in the New Testament, the word brother(s), or *adelphos* in Greek, is translated as *kainga* (relatives).

depends on the success of the other. Therefore, for the success of the church we need to relate to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, a family of God.

Appendix C: Christian Giving

The indigenous Tongan understands giving as an obligatory duty and an act of worship and reverence to gods and king/chiefs. Consequently, the early Tongan Church assumed that understanding but with an added meaning of supporting the missionary. Thus, the church called it *misinale* (missionary). Nowadays mainstream Tongan churches that grew out of Tongan Methodism do *misinale* (annual giving to the church) mainly as fundraising or collecting of members' financial contributions for the coming year's budget. Therefore, they perform it in a more celebrative and competitive way to raise enough to balance the Church's budget. Despite its being part of a worship service, in most recent *misinales*, some people resorted to weird behavior such as dressing like a clown or entertainer, dancing in an odd manner, and amusingly teasing other members while presenting their offerings. These celebrative actions were probably adopted from an ancient way of giving, such as *'inasi* (offering of the first-fruits), and later claimed to be supposedly similar to Paul's advice regarding giving: "Each one of you should give just as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, because God loves a cheerful giver."¹³ However, the emphasis is on being a *cheerful* giver; mostly ignored is the freedom for the amount of offering as each one has decided. On the other hand, in the previous verse, (the one who sows sparingly or bountifully will also reap accordingly) most people have misinterpreted it to mean that the more you give, the more you will receive. Consequently, all Tongan UMC clergy prefer *misinale* because it is not only a tradition, but people would give more than privately giving or pledging as in the UMC system. This is possibly the norm for all the FWCT and UMC clergy in Tonga and abroad. The implication is that the majority of the donors only contribute a large sum because their donation is publicized.¹⁴ As mentioned above, the donor's name and the amount donated are announced out loud for everyone to know. This approach does not reflect the teachings of Jesus about piety and secrecy of giving.¹⁵

As discussed above, the Tongan Church also understands *misinale* and other forms of offering, or giving to the Church, such as feasts and monetary gifts for Church buildings, as sacrificial giving. As Christians, we have the privilege to express our gratitude to God in many ways. The apostle Peter refers to this and pleads that we "offer up spiritual sacrifices to God."¹⁶ Peter does not specify here what these sacrifices are, except that they are spiritual, and not physical. Through studying other passages in the New Testament, however, one discovers several different sacrifices that Christians practice in worshipping God. It is important to note that no one way is viewed as more spiritual than the others, but all are important to Christian living and spirituality. What does the bible say about these spiritual sacrifices? Paul says, "I urge you therefore,

¹³ 2 Corinthians 9:7 (NET).

¹⁴ Tongan traditional giving is mostly a presentation of gifts. The orator presents the giver's gifts and the orator from the receiver would praise the presentation and present his own as an appreciation. It is like a gift exchange but publicly in the form of presentation.

¹⁵ Matthew 6:1-4.

¹⁶ 1 Peter 2:5 (NASB).

brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, well-pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”¹⁷ According to Paul, this sacrifice, offering one’s life, is a spiritual service of worship. Through Christ then, Paul urges all Christians to continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of the lips that give thanks to his name.¹⁸ This is another spiritual sacrifice that pleases God – praising and thanking God for all that God is and does for us. The practice of thankfulness to God is stressed over and over again in the New Testament.¹⁹

The other sacrifice is “doing good.” This phrase refers to ministry – performing deeds of loving service to other people as representatives of Christ. When Christians serve the needy in love, God regards this as an expression of our worship of God. Paul says, “Let us not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”²⁰ Sacrifice is living a Christ-like life, sacrificial love, not as a duty, but as a life to live. God is pleased when Christians do good to others for it also demonstrates that they are living with an attitude of trust and obedience in God’s love. Christians are motivated to love others because they understand and believe that God loves all people of the world.²¹

After Paul urges Christians to present their lives to God as an act of worship, he continues to express that using one’s spiritual gifts is a way of worship. Christians should use their spiritual gifts regularly in the service of others because it is uniquely satisfying to God. It should be clear from this study that worship in the New Testament is a lifestyle made up of many kinds of activity, and not necessarily a corporate meeting such as worship service for the sake of fellowship.

Of all the New Testament writers, only James clearly expresses his understanding of religion. He says, “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”²² For James, true religion is caring and serving the needs of the marginalized masses in the community.

In addition, as mentioned above, there is a constant debate on the right biblical giving. What method of giving is biblical or ordained by God, Jesus, or approved by the apostles? Here, discussion includes tithing and cheerful giving stated by Paul with other similar terms. First, the tithe, one tenth, first appears in the Old Testament as a gift that Abram gave to Melchizedek, the king of Salem and priest of God, as a reward and a token of thanksgiving for God’s favor in recent battle.²³ Later, Jacob established a shrine at Bethel and promised a tithe to God. Then in the Torah, the tithe was regulated to be observed by the Israelites as a gift for the Lord using seed, grain, wine, oil, and firstlings of herds and flocks.²⁴ However, Jesus, Paul, and even the rest of the New Testament writers pay little attention to tithing or to mention it in their writings. To illustrate, tithing appears twice in the Gospels, Matthew and Luke, in Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees for

¹⁷ Romans 12:1-2 (NASB).

¹⁸ Hebrews 13:15 (NASB).

¹⁹ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Col. 3:15-17.

²⁰ Hebrews 13:16 (NASB).

²¹ 1 John 4:16-19.

²² James 1:26-27 (NRSV).

²³ Genesis 14: 20.

²⁴ Deuteronomy 24:22-24 (NASB).

bragging about observing it that they were better than those who did not observe it. Like Jesus' teaching on giving, early Christians such as the Church Fathers argued that Jesus' teachings on giving superseded the Old Testament regulations on tithing. For instance, Irenaeus wrote that "tithes of their [Jews] goods consecrated to Him [God], but those who have received liberty set aside all their possessions for the Lord's purposes, bestowing joyfully and freely" (*haer.* 4:18 in ANF 1:485). In the same way, Paul urges the Corinthians to give in support of the poor Christians in Jerusalem; however, each one should give freely and accordingly and not compulsory.

In the same manner, John Wesley in his sermon, *The Use of Money*, has said to "Gain all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can."²⁵ For Wesley, one should give freely according to one's own ability. However, when Wesley went into detail of how to "give all you can," he made a dramatic point that could be disturbing to the Tongan Methodists (FWCT and UMC) and most Tongans. I also maintain in this project that the Tongan way of giving, both *misinale* (annual giving to the church) and *fakaafe/feilaulau* (feast and/or gift of money to the church/clergy) is primarily derived from ancient tradition of 'inasi (offering of the first-fruits to the king/chiefs as sacrifice to gods), then from the Bible. Wesley states, "If you desire to be a faithful and a wise steward . . . with the right of resuming whenever it pleases him [God]," first, give to yourself all you need for the basics; second, give to your family and employees their fair share or you are worse than an infidel; third, give to the household of faith – other Christians, which we assume includes the organized work of the Lord in churches and; finally, give to all men in need, which includes the poor, the needy, even if they are not believers."²⁶ In the Tongan tradition, giving is first and foremost to God through the church (including its ministry, activities, and clergy), then to family and others. However, for Jesus, early Christians, and John Wesley, giving is not an obligation or a regulation, such as the tithe, but freely from a cheerful heart. Additionally, every Christian should love and care for oneself, family, and then others including giving to the church, charity and others. Therefore, the Tongan clergy should educate and encourage the adherents to do *misinale* (annual giving) as an act of spiritual worship in such a way that constructively builds up members' spirituality and relationship with God and one another and not with entertainment or competitive giving that leads to the brink of bankruptcy and poverty.

²⁵ John Wesley, *Sermons*, The Works of John Wesley, v. 2, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 268-73.

²⁶ Wesley, 277.

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